HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

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

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

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Greg Clark, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
   The Rt Hon. Claire Perry, MP (Minister for Energy and Clean Growth)
   Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of State—
   Kelly Tolhurst, MP
   Richard Harrington, MP
   The Rt Hon. Lord Henley

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

Defence—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
   The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §
   The Rt Hon. Mark Lancaster, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of State—
   The Rt Hon. Tobias Ellwood, MP
   Stuart Andrew, MP

Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jeremy Wright, QC, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Margot James, MP (Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of State—
   Lord Ashton of Hyde
   Michael Ellis, MP
   Mims Davies, MP
Education—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Damian Hinds, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
  The Rt Hon. Nick Gibb, MP (Minister for School Standards)
  The Rt Hon. Anne Milton, MP (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills)
  Chris Skidmore, MP (Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation) §
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
  Lord Agnew of Oulton
  Nadhim Zahawi, MP

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

Exiting the European Union—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Stephen Barclay, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Callanan
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
  Robin Walker, MP
  Chris Heaton-Harris, MP
  Kwasi Kwarteng, MP

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

Health and Social Care—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Matt Hancock, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
  Stephen Hammond, MP (Minister for Health)
  Caroline Dinenage, MP (Minister for Care)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
  Jackie Doyle-Price, MP
  Steve Brine, MP
  Lord O'Shaughnessy

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

Housing, Communities and Local Government—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. James Brokenshire, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Kit Malthouse, MP (Minister for Housing)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
  Jake Berry, MP
  Heather Wheeler, MP
  Rishi Sunak, MP
  Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §

International Development—
SECRETARY OF STATE AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Penny Mordaunt, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
  The Rt Hon. Alistair Burt, MP §
  Harriett Baldwin, MP §
  The Rt Hon. Lord Bates
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
  Victoria Atkins, MP §
  Baroness Williams of Trafford §
International Trade—
SECRETARY OF STATE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
  George Hollingbery, MP (Minister for Trade Policy)
  Baroness Fairhead (Minister for Trade and Export Promotion)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Graham Stuart, MP

Justice—
LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Gauke, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Rory Stewart, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of State—
  Lucy Frazer, QC, MP
  Edward Argar, MP
ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

Law Officers—
ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt. Hon. Geoffrey Cox, QC, MP
Solicitor General—Robert Buckland, QC, MP
ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Lord Keen of Elie, QC

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

Northern Ireland Office—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Karen Bradley, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—John Penrose, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SecretARY OF STATE—Lord Duncan of Springbank §

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

Transport—
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Chris Grayling, MP
MINISTER OF STATE—Jesse Norman, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries of State—
  Andrew Jones, MP
  Baroness Sugg, CBE §
  Nusrat Ghani, MP §

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

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—
  Mike Freer, MP
  Paul Maynard, MP
  Craig Whittaker, MP
  Rebecca Harris, MP
  David Rutley, MP §
  Jeremy Quin, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—
  Nusrat Ghani, MP §
  Iain Stewart, MP
  Jo Churchill, MP
  Amanda Milling, MP
  Michelle Donelan, MP
  Gareth Johnson, MP
  Wendy Morton, MP
  Nigel Adams, MP §
UK Export Finance—
SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Liam Fox, MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE AND EXPORT PROMOTION—Baroness Fairhead
Wales Office
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Alun Cairns, MP
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF State—
Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth §
Nigel Adams, MP §
Work and Pensions
SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Amber Rudd, MP
MINISTERS OF STATE—
Alok Sharma, MP (Minister for Employment)
Sarah Newton, MP (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work)
PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-Secretaries OF State—
Guy Opperman, MP
Baroness Buscombe
Justin Tomlinson, MP
Office of the Leader of the House of Lords
LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS AND LORD PRIVY SEAL—The Rt. Hon. Baroness Evans of Bowes Park
DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Earl Howe §
Her Majesty’s Household—
LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Earl Peel GCVO, DL
LORD STEWART—The Earl of Dalhousie
MASTER OF THE HORSE—Lord Vestey KCVO
TREASURER—Christopher Pincher, MP
COMPTROLLER—Mark Spencer, MP
VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Andrew Stephenson, MP
CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Taylor of Holbeach CBE
CAPTAIN OF THE QUEEN’S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Earl of Courtown
BARONESSES IN WAITING—Baroness Vere of Norbiton, Baroness Sugg CBE §, Baroness Goldie DL, Baroness Stedman-Scott DL, Baroness Manzoor CBE
LORDS IN WAITING—Viscount Younger of Leckie, The Rt Hon. Lord Young of Cookham CH

§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP
REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—Bridget Phillipson, MP
REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER’S COMMITTEE FOR THE INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY—Mr Charles Walker, MP
REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Tom Brake, MP
CHAIRMAN OF THE PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION—Sir Edward Leigh, MP
10 December 2018
Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—
Land Value Capture

1. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What is his policy is on land value capture.

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise the need for more homes, including more rental and affordable homes for people, as we deliver against our agenda. The best way to do that is through local plans, which allow local councils to provide housing in suitable locations. Local plans will certainly ensure that local communities get the houses they need, but I take on board the point my hon. Friend rightly makes about communities and making sure that value is felt.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Secretary of State will accept that, according to the Government’s own figures, when planning permission is given for housing to be built on agricultural land, that land increases in value, on average, by about 100 times. Does he accept that more of that increase in value should go to pay for public infrastructure and general community benefit? Will he therefore go further than he has promised and agree to look again at the Land Compensation Act 1961, to which the Select Committee on Communities and Local Government recommended a change, which was supported by a wide range of organisations and by hon. Members right across the political spectrum?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and the Select Committee for the work that they have done in rightly highlighting an important issue. It is worth bearing in mind the fact that section 106 planning obligations and the community infrastructure levy levied in 2016-17 provided an estimated £6 billion of value. However, the point he makes is an important one. We wanted to see better utilisation of the existing rules, and the Letwin review makes further proposals, and we will be reflecting on those and coming back to the House in the new year.

Mr Mark Prisk (Hertford and Stortford) (Con): Part of the Government’s policy is to enable large urban councils to establish a strategic infrastructure fund of their own, but at present this excludes smaller councils such as mine in East Herts. May I therefore urge the Secretary of State to amend his proposals so that any
council with a local plan that is planning to deliver a new settlement is included in that and can establish such a fund? May I meet him to discuss that further?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. I recognise the concerted work and effort that is going on to deliver homes and infrastructure through the local plan in his area. He rightly says that combined authorities with strategic planning powers will be able to introduce a strategic infrastructure tariff, but charging authorities can already pool their community infrastructure levy receipts to fund infrastructure jointly. We are updating the guidance to make that clearer, but I would be happy to continue that discussion with him.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): In the midst of today’s political chaos, I wonder whether it is worth questioning the Secretary of State at all, as Cabinet members do not seem to be told what Government policy really is. Just as this Government are failing on Brexit, they are failing other big tests, such as taking on vested land interests and fixing the housing crisis. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), the Select Committee Chair, has just said, the Secretary of State’s own figures show that the price of land can soar hundredfold when planning permission is granted. That profiteering by landowners and agents pushes up the cost of the homes we buy and the rents we pay, and it blocks building the new low-cost homes we need on a big scale. After nearly nine years in government, why has the Secretary of State not put a stop to this?

James Brokenshire: It is a bit rich for the right hon. Gentleman to talk about policy, given that his own side has very little policy to show at all on a range of issues. He asks a fair question about building the homes that our country needs, which is why it is right to highlight to the House the 222,000 additional dwellings in the past year. That is profoundly about not only building the homes our country needs, but about ensuring that we are looking at viability and getting these issues of land value capture addressed—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is impossible to describe the extent of my gratitude to the Secretary of State, who is among the most courteous Members of the House, but I say very gently to colleagues that we have a lot of questions to get through. We therefore need short questions and short answers so that we can reach people lower down the Order Paper, because I am more bothered about the Back Benches than I am about the Front Benches.

John Healey: The Secretary of State tells us to wait till next year, but he may not be in government next year. In truth, this is a Government who delay and duck the big decisions on housing because they are too dysfunctional and too divided, just as they are on Brexit. His own Members know that their policy is failing and want action taken on land costs, so will he change the law so that the Government can work with councils to compulsorily purchase land without paying for landowner speculation, then use the savings to cut the costs for first-time buyers and renters? Even if the Secretary of State cannot get the backing of the House for his Brexit deal, he would get it for a radical plan to make the land market work for the benefit of the many, and not the few.

James Brokenshire: Our policies are not about the many, not about the few; they are for everyone in terms of delivering on our housing agenda. Yes, we will consult on the new draft amended community infrastructure regulations, and I look forward to having the debate on them. It is this Government who are taking action to build the homes that our country needs. We will certainly take no lessons from the other side.

Local Government Funding

2. Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure fairness in the allocation of funding to local government.

3. Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to ensure fairness in the allocation of funding to local government.

4. Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Lambeth Council and Southwark Council have lost £6 in every £10 of Government grant they had to spend in 2010, yet across London the population is rising faster, levels of deprivation are greater, and the cost of
delivering services is higher than anywhere else in the country. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that the fair funding review will restore funding to London councils and not result in further cuts?

James Brokenshire: We will certainly look at the available evidence on how the relative review of resources is affected throughout the country, and we will take account of evidence from London councils and others. Equally, I hope that the hon. Lady will recognise the announcement in the Budget of additional funding for things like social care. An extra £650 million will go around to councils to help to make that difference.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Reeling from the biggest cuts in local government history of £650 million, with another £123 million to come, Birmingham has put forward a powerful case for fair funding. Now, an announcement has been delayed. When will the Secretary of State make his announcement? Will he listen to Birmingham, because frankly Birmingham has had enough?

James Brokenshire: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be able to make his points in relation to the provisional settlement for local government, which I look forward to delivering very shortly. He will have an opportunity to make representations for Birmingham and others on the fair funding review, and there will be further opportunities. I look forward to engaging with the hon. Gentleman and others in that regard.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): The budgets of the local authorities that serve my constituency are under particular strain because of the increasing number of looked-after children. What additional resources are likely to be made available to cover that need?

James Brokenshire: We are very conscious of the pressures on areas such as children’s social services, which my hon. Friend highlights and, equally, of some of the differentials that exist around the country. He will, however, note the additional funding that was committed in the Budget to these issues and we therefore continue to work with him and others and look forward to the spending review next year.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Daily Record reported recently that councils in Scotland have set aside £24 million to deal with the impact of universal credit, including £2.5 million in Glasgow, £3 million in Edinburgh and £4.5 million in South Lanarkshire. How can it possibly be fair that, when central Government decisions are having a huge impact on local government funding, we can do nothing about it?

James Brokenshire: A clear mechanism is in place in relation to what are known as the new burdens on local government and therefore we take that into account and reflect further on the costs that local authorities may have in relation to other governmental activities, and that is what we do.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The record is clear: Northamptonshire bust; other councils edging towards the cliff edge; and no end to austerity, with cuts to council budgets continuing. Last week, senior officials told the Public Accounts Committee that their measure of a council’s financial sustainability is now based solely on the delivery of statutory services. Our councils are at breaking point. Is the Secretary of State not even slightly embarrassed that his Ministry has let the cat out of the bag on the decimation of local public services on his watch?

James Brokenshire: Yes, local authorities have had to bear a cost and have made some incredible efficiencies and savings as a consequence of the need to deal with the problems that we inherited from the previous Labour Government. I say to the hon. Gentleman that, when we came to the discussion over the settlement, he will see that our work will ensure that local councils have a real-terms increase in their funding and services and therefore what we are doing to ensure that councils are viable and have a positive future.

Leasehold Reform

3. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): When his Department plans to publish a response to its consultation on implementing reforms to the leasehold system.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Department’s consultation on implementing reforms to the leasehold system closed on 26 November with almost 1,300 responses. It set out how the Government intend to tackle excessive and unjustifiable practices in the leasehold system. We are currently analysing responses and plan to publish the Government response in due course.

Justin Madders: I know that the Secretary of State has, on numerous occasions, met developers, freeholders and other industry stakeholders as part of the consultation process, but he has not met representatives of the National Leasehold Campaign, the very people most affected by this scandal. Is it not time that he did so?

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise some of the appalling practices that have taken place in the leasehold market, which is why we have made it clear that anyone with doubled ground rent should be able to get it changed to one linked to inflation. I look forward to engaging with leaseholders and everyone across the sector to see that reform happens.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): The House will welcome what my right hon. Friend has said. On another day, we can deal with the statutory instrument recognising leasehold associations.

Today, I ask him to note the Law Commission’s proposals on getting commonhold working properly. May I draw his attention to the post on the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership website, which says that the Government’s Help to Buy team advised a builder that flats cannot be bought under commonhold because that does not apply within its rules? Can he get the rules changed so that commonhold, which we all want, can work?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I will certainly look at the point that he has raised. I highlight the fact that the Government support the use
of commonhold and we are considering all the options for reinvigorating it. We certainly recognise the publication of the Law Commission's consultation and want everybody to take part in it.

Fiona Onasanya (Peterborough) (Lab): Will the Government back Labour by announcing an inquiry into the mis-selling of leaseholds?

James Brokenshire: What we need to do is to get on and get things changed. Having a review in the way that the hon. Lady has suggested is about deferring things, and get things changed. Having a review in the way that the hon. Lady suggests is about deferring things, and get things changed. Having a review in the way that the Government who are intent on actually bringing about reform.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): The leasehold problem is an abiding scandal, and the Secretary of State does need to fix it. When he is reforming it will he consider being imaginative enough to copy the city of The Hague, which allows people on the housing register to go on to a register to get a serviced plot of land, which, if they cannot afford to buy it, they can lease at a peppercorn rent and then elect to buy later? If we are going to have reform, let us have imaginative reform.

James Brokenshire: I look forward to discussing that issue with my hon. Friend, because there is a sense of a need for change. Some of the abuses that we have seen are unacceptable. Although we have already put forward proposals to make that difference, I will certainly continue to talk to colleagues who may have some further imaginative thoughts.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I was shocked to hear that A2Dominion has sent leaseholders of a block in my constituency a landlord water bill of £900 per flat payable within 30 days, with the only explanation being that it had not read the water meter for two years. This has caused huge stress for residents and is the latest in the long line of unacceptable, sudden invoices with little or no explanation. Does the Secretary of State agree that there needs to be a change in the transparency and standards of housing association service charges, because leaseholders are treated like cash cows and the law is weighted in favour of landlords?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for highlighting that particular example. It is especially appalling that leaseholders should have been presented with such a significant charge in that way. If she can send me some more details, I will look into the matter further.

Adult Social Care

6. Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): What assessment has his Department made of the adequacy of the new grant funding for the delivery of adult social care announced in Budget 2018.

Paul Blomfield: I recently met local carers, whose unpaid work for loved ones takes enormous pressures off budgets, but inadequate funding for adult social care is putting additional strains on them. Some gains support from local councils and others from local groups such as Sheffield Carers Centre, but most are invisible. What support is the Department providing to local authorities to identify carers so that they can get the help that they need?

Rishi Sunak: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to highlight the valuable work that those carers do in our society, and that should be recognised. It is for individual local authorities to decide how best to support carers in their areas. As the Secretary of State previously said, £650 million of incremental funding for social care was announced in the Budget. That funding could be used to provide support in the way the hon. Gentleman suggests.

Jeff Smith: Councils are predicting that an additional £3.6 billion will be needed by 2025, just to maintain current levels of care. Does the Minister think that it is either sensible or economically sustainable that councils are having to use their dwindling reserves to deliver care to people? That is what many of them are doing and what many more will have to do.

Rishi Sunak: Speaking of reserves, reserves in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and area have actually increased by 40% since 2011. Beyond funding, the delivery of social care is a function of joined-up thinking with the NHS. I was delighted to meet the chief officer for Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership in Manchester recently, and I am glad that almost all local authorities agree that our better care fund has improved joint working between health and social care.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the adoption of a German-style social insurance premium, as recommended by the joint inquiry of the Select Committees on Health and on Communities and Local Government, would ease funding pressures on local authorities and ensure that everyone had access to the social care that they needed?

Rishi Sunak: I thank my hon. Friend and all members of the two Select Committees for their thoughtful and detailed work in this area. I know that my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care are seriously considering all options in advance of the social care Green Paper, and the Committees' recommendations are very much a part of the those deliberations.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Social care is characterised by low pay and poor employment conditions, and is heavily dependent on EU labour to meet labour force needs. The Migration Advisory Committee says that only by raising pay in the sector
will it be possible to replace EU labour with UK workers. Will the Minister commit to the additional £3 billion of funding that will be needed to do that?

**Rishi Sunak:** Immigration matters are obviously for the Home Office, which is shortly to bring out its White Paper. With regard to the funding, as I just said, the Department of Health and Social Care is working on a long-term sustainable funding settlement for social care that we look forward to seeing in due course.

**Carbon-neutral Housing**

7. **Mr Laurence Robertson** (Tewkesbury) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase the amount of carbon-neutral housing; and if he will make a statement.  

**The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse):** As set out in the Government’s clean growth strategy, we plan to consult in the spring of next year on an uplift to the energy efficiency requirements for new homes and other buildings where there are safe, practical, cost-effective and affordable opportunities to do so.

**Mr Robertson:** I thank the Minister for that response. At a time when the Government are urging more house building and looking at climate change as well, would it not be a good time to change building regulations so that all houses are self-sufficient in electricity? That would have the dual benefit of reducing utility costs and saving the planet.

**Kit Malthouse:** My hon. Friend is a persistent and effective advocate for renewable energy and for energy self-sufficiency. He is quite right that technology is currently emerging that may well enable domestic self-sufficiency in the future. I would be more than happy to explore the possibilities with him in the spring.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Do the Minister and the rest of the Ministers on the Front Bench not understand that those in local government are so demoralised by a lack of funding that they cannot get their heads round carbon-neutral housing or almost anything else because they are struggling to meet the basic needs? In my own local authority area, which I have grasped the raised energy standards for new homes over the past few years, increasing to local authorities, which have inherited a housing crisis of enormous proportions.

**Kit Malthouse:**: As my hon. Friend will know, my writ does not run north of the border. However, I note that in the autumn Budget of 2017, the Scottish Government received Barnett consequentials of almost £1 billion as a result of increased allocations to MHCLG for Help to Buy. I urge him and his colleagues north of the border to keep campaigning—to keep the pressure up—because Help to Buy is enormously popular and is helping many tens of thousands of first-time buyers, in particular, on to the housing ladder. At the very least, they should join him in campaigning for a Conservative victory in the Scottish elections in 2021 to make sure that people will get the homes they need.

**Mr Barry Sheerman:**: I thank the Minister for that response. At a time when the Government are urging more house building and looking at climate change as well, would it not be a good time to change building regulations so that all houses are self-sufficient in electricity? That would have the dual benefit of reducing utility costs and saving the planet.

**Kit Malthouse:**: My hon. Friend is a persistent and effective advocate for renewable energy and for energy self-sufficiency. He is quite right that technology is currently emerging that may well enable domestic self-sufficiency in the future. I would be more than happy to explore the possibilities with him in the spring.

**Mr Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Do the Minister and the rest of the Ministers on the Front Bench not understand that those in local government are so demoralised by a lack of funding that they cannot get their heads round carbon-neutral housing or almost anything else because they are struggling to meet the basic needs? In my own local authority area, which I have grasped the raised energy standards for new homes over the past few years, increasing to local authorities, which have inherited a housing crisis of enormous proportions.

**Kit Malthouse:**: As my hon. Friend will know, my writ does not run north of the border. However, I note that in the autumn Budget of 2017, the Scottish Government received Barnett consequentials of almost £1 billion as a result of increased allocations to MHCLG for Help to Buy. I urge him and his colleagues north of the border to keep campaigning—to keep the pressure up—because Help to Buy is enormously popular and is helping many tens of thousands of first-time buyers, in particular, on to the housing ladder. At the very least, they should join him in campaigning for a Conservative victory in the Scottish elections in 2021 to make sure that people will get the homes they need.

**Clive Efford** (Eltham) (Lab): Why has home ownership fallen to the lowest level in 30 years under this Government?

**Kit Malthouse:**: Home ownership has been on a gradual decline for some time—the hon. Gentleman is quite right—under Governments of all types. The main reason, frankly, that it has declined very significantly is that Labour crashed the economy in 2007-08, as he well knows. The coalition Government and this Government inherited a housing crisis of enormous proportions. After the crash, net additions to the housing stock fell to a low of 134,000. We have thankfully now got it up to 222,000, with more yet to do, and made an enormous financial, technical and practical commitment to the housing market and to building the homes that the country needs, unlike Labour, which was so complacent that it ran us into a brick wall.

**Sir Mike Penning** (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): Unemployment in Hemel Hempstead is at the lowest level it has ever been since the new town was built, so we would think that there would be more right to buy in the case of the 18,000 council houses that we still have in the stock. Unfortunately, though, because there is a £77,000 limit on the amount of discount we can get, people working in the local community—nurses and firemen—cannot afford mortgages as the properties are very highly priced. Can we look at the £77,000 limit, particularly in the south-east, because it just not does work for right to buy?

**Kit Malthouse:**: As my right hon. Friend will know, home ownership is extremely important to the Government, as it is to him. Affordability is an issue in areas such as his, on the fringe of the capital. We have kept right-to-buy discount under review, and it was reinvigorated back in 2012, to address the issue that he raises. I urge him to speak to his local council, to explore other ways within the affordable housing envelope to address that issue. If he had been at questions last time, he would have heard a very good question from my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) about discounted market sales, which may well be a route to ownership for many people.
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the Minister meet me to discuss funding new affordable homes in rural communities such as mine in Cumbria by allowing councils to increase council tax on second homes? Excessive second home ownership robs our communities of a permanent population. A second homes tax could help to fund affordable homes for local families and keep our communities alive.

Kit Malthouse: It would give me enormous pleasure to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that matter. As he will know, we have been looking at that in some detail, and the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), tells me that we are consulting on tightening up some of the loopholes, particularly around business rates and council tax. I recognise that in some parts of the country—not least my own—second homes can be an issue, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I would like to draw the attention of the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) to an article in Inside Housing by Jules Birch called “England could learn a few things from Scotland when it comes to affordable housing”. Since 2007, the SNP Scottish Government have delivered 78,000 affordable homes, including more than 50,000 for social rent, because we have made it a priority. As this Government have fallen far short of every target they have set, may I encourage them to learn a few things from Scotland when it comes to affordable housing?

Richard Graham rose—

Mr Speaker: Before the hon. Gentleman puts his question, I appreciate that the Minister is probably operating on earlier intelligence, but Question 17 has gone, and therefore the grouping is merely with Question 20—a point that I am sure other Members instantly knew and of which I am merely reminding them.

Richard Graham: As the Minister knows, small urban areas have limited space to generate increased new homes bonus. If my hon. Friend could announce that Gloucester and Cheltenham were to be pilot projects for retaining all business rates revenue, that would be a welcome Christmas present, but in the absence of that, what advice would he give to good urban councils that are keen to maintain their services and regenerate their city or borough centres?

Rishi Sunak: I was delighted to meet recently my hon. Friend and those in his local authority. It was inspiring to hear their ambitious plans to grow the local economy, and I commend them for their vision. I would urge them to look at the recently announced high streets fund, which can help them to ensure that their town remains a vibrant and prosperous community.

Maggie Throup: As part of the review, will my hon. Friend ensure that councils such as Erewash have the funding necessary to properly support residents affected by High Speed 2 and mitigate the impact that this line will have on our towns?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend is right to raise that. The review relates to the distribution of funding for core services that are funded through the local government finance settlement, but the Government have introduced a number of statutory and non-statutory compensation schemes along the HS2 route, including in my hon. Friend’s constituency, which are designed to compensate those whose properties are affected.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): It is neither hysterical nor alarmist to say that local government faces an existential threat to its very being when even sensible, efficient and serious councils such as Ealing are having to cut their services to the bone and beyond. It is quite right that the Local Government Association’s current campaign is called “Breaking Point”. Has the Minister met the LGA, and if so, what succour can he offer it and councils such as Ealing?

Rishi Sunak: I meet the LGA on almost a weekly basis. I am pleased to tell the hon. Gentleman. I can also say that the LGA, the County Councils Network and many other part of the local government sector warmly welcome the announcements in the recent Budget providing a substantial increase in funding for social care. They believe enormously in the confidence that this Government have shown in local authorities, when it comes to the future high streets fund and others, and in their ability to deliver for their communities and their residents.

Local Government Funding

9. Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to review the distribution of funding to local government.

20. Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to review the distribution of funding to local government.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to answer Question 9 with Question 17.

We are undertaking a review of local authorities’ relative resource and needs. We are making good progress in collaboration with the sector and are considering many topics that hon. Members have raised as we look to introduce a simple, accurate and transparent new funding formula.
Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister may have read the article on the front page of today’s Manchester Evening News, which is both powerful and harrowing. It is a truly awful account of what it is like for homeless families in Manchester today by the brilliant journalist Jennifer Williams. When will the Government come forward with a proper comprehensive plan for funding for local government so that it can serve families and, when they are in desperate need, house them in decent homes?

Rishi Sunak: I thank the hon. Lady for bringing to my attention that article, which I will be sure to look at later today. I know the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), who has responsibility for housing and homelessness, is hard at work tackling this difficult issue, with over £1 billion committed over the next few years. Indeed, I believe Manchester is a pilot for the Housing First schemes as well.

Voluntary Right to Buy Pilot Scheme

10. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): What progress has been made on the voluntary right to buy pilot in the midlands.

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): The midlands pilot was launched on 16 August, with over 9,000 households registering for the ballot. Successful tenants are now applying to their housing association to buy their home. Our £200 million investment in the pilot will help thousands of housing association tenants to realise the dream of home ownership.

Steve McCabe: I realise this is a pilot, but if the Government do not know how many properties are available for sale and how many of the Mayor’s 6,000 lottery winners will actually be able to buy their own home, how is this the best use of scarce resources—£200 million—in the part of the country with the worst homelessness problem outside London and the south-east?

Kit Malthouse: The whole purpose of a pilot is to answer the questions that the hon. Gentleman quite rightly raises. As for whether this is the best use of resources, I think that 9,146 housing association tenants in the area might agree it is, given that they applied for the funding. He is quite right that 6,000 were successful in the ballot, and we expect a smaller number than that to proceed to take advantage of buying their own home. Following the completion of the pilot, we will assess and answer those questions about where we go next.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): My constituent Joanne Betts of Cawston in Rugby was very disappointed not to be successful in the ballot. When does the Minister think she may have an opportunity to buy her home? She has of course contributed a large proportion of its cost through the rent she has paid over many years.

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise the disappointment of his constituent. I am sorry that there were winners and losers in the ballot, but it was laid out early on in the pilot that the £200 million was capable of funding only a certain number of sales. We reckon that will be less than 6,000; we over-programmed it because not everybody will be able to proceed. Once the pilot is completed, and we can assess the results and the demand, we will be able to take a view on where we go next.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister clarify the Government’s position in relation to the right to buy in the voluntary sector? As he knows, the voluntary sector is under a lot of pressure.

Kit Malthouse: As the hon. Gentleman will understand, the pilot is a voluntary pilot. We agreed with the National Housing Federation that the midlands was a good place to do it to assess, from both the housing association sector and the Government side, how we can best effect and fulfil the aspiration of the majority of housing association tenants who want to own—from a financial point of view but also from an effectiveness point of view. We want the pilot to bed in, to see how it performs over the next couple of years and then to reach some conclusions after that.

Rough Sleeping

11. Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support people sleeping rough at Christmas 2018.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The rough sleeping initiative has allocated £30 million to 83 local authorities, which are working to deliver 500 additional support workers and 1,750 extra bed spaces to support people off the street. The Government have also made available a £5 million cold weather fund for all areas to provide additional support this winter.

Jess Phillips: I thank the Minister for his answer. I wonder whether he could answer me a simple question. I would appreciate a one-word answer, as I am sure Mr Speaker will. The rough sleeping headcount in Birmingham took place last week. The figures are yet to be revealed. Does the Minister think that they will have gone up or down?

James Brokenshire: I am not going to predict, because—[Interruption.] I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady. I want to see the figures coming down, because it is about helping people off the street and changing their lives. No one chooses to be out on the street. That is why we are taking all the action that we are.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): What is the Government’s estimate of the proportion of those sleeping rough who are not addicted to drugs, including alcohol?

James Brokenshire: We recognise that there is a significant issue with what is known as dual diagnosis of mental ill health and alcohol addiction and how the two are intertwined, along with the use of novel psychoactive substances, which has compounded the issue. That is why we have asked the national health service to provide an additional £30 million to address those issues and get better data on them.
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): There cannot be a Member in this House who has failed to notice the exponential rise in people sleeping on our streets, and not just in cities such as London, but in places such as Dewsbury, which I represent. Will the Secretary of State tell us what progress has been made on the Government pledge to end homelessness?

James Brokenshire: It is our intent to see rough sleeping ended. I highlighted in my earlier answer the additional beds, the additional workers and the funding support that has been put in place, because it is about progress over the next few years, but also action now, which is what the rough sleeping initiative is all about: saving lives and seeing more people come off the street.

Homelessness and Social Housing

12. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): If he will make an assessment of the effect of social housing providers’ allocation policies on levels of homelessness. [908100]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): Access to social housing is managed locally, but certain people must be given priority, including homeless households. The social housing Green Paper announced an evidence collection exercise to understand how the allocations framework is working and whether it is striking the right balance of fairness, support and aspiration.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Two hundred and eighty-nine young people are presenting themselves as homeless in Bath and North East Somerset Council alone. Will the Minister’s Department use the current review of social housing regulation to ensure that social housing allocation policies do not lock out young people, who are especially disadvantaged by the current policy?

Mrs Wheeler: Yes.

Mr Speaker: We are very grateful.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment has my hon. Friend made of local authorities assisting rough sleepers into a home of their own following the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 coming into law?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for his question. Unfortunately, I did not hear the very beginning of it, but I think the gist was that the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 is a very welcome new Act. We are grateful for everybody’s hard work on it earlier this year. We will review it after 24 months, but so far my understanding is that local councils are impressed with how well it is being embedded.

Shared Prosperity Fund

13. Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): What progress he has made on plans for the UK shared prosperity fund.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): Leaving the European Union offers great opportunity to the country, including coming up with a shared prosperity fund that aligns our national priorities. Good progress is being made, and we intend to consult on the design of the UK shared prosperity fund shortly.

Steve Double: I am sure the whole House will agree that Cornwall is unique in many ways—we have our own heritage and culture, including our own language—but we also face a number of unique economic challenges, particularly from our geography as a peninsula and after decades of under-investment. Will the Minister confirm that the shared prosperity fund will continue to support the Cornish economy, so that we can all continue to say, “Kernow bys vyken”?

Jake Berry: If I may respond in Cornish, I take the opportunity to wish my hon. Friend and all his constituents Nadelik lowen. With only 109 shopping days to Brexit, I can reassure my hon. Friend that the UK shared prosperity fund will be simplified and targeted, and will tackle the challenges of our whole country, including those facing Cornwall.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): This weekend, the mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, resigned from the Northern Powerhouse Partnership. He says he no longer sees the benefit, given that it was set up by a Government who just do not want to listen to it. At the same time, the Institute for Public Policy Research North paints a stark picture, where the north gets £2,500 less per head in investment on transport than London. The northern powerhouse Minister literally has one job to do. What’s going on?

Jake Berry: As Harry Enfield and his chums would say about anyone from Liverpool, including me: “Calm down, calm down.” I can confirm today that we have announced £38.4 million for Liverpool. I completely refute the IPPR figures. They exclude 60% of spending across regional boundaries. They do not apportion spending where the benefit is felt. If the hon. Gentleman wants to give some advice to his chums in the left-wing IPPR think-tank, he might say that next time they produce such figures they should print them on softer paper.

Grenfell Tower

14. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support people directly affected by the Grenfell Tower fire.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Government remain committed to ensuring that the survivors of the Grenfell Tower tragedy receive the support they need. This includes financial, practical and health support, as well as making sure that all survivors are permanently rehoused by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea as quickly as possible.

Andrew Rosindell: It is 18 months since the tragedy of Grenfell Tower. Will the Secretary of State tell us what process is in place to deal with psychological and trauma problems still faced by the survivors of that horrific occasion 18 months ago?
James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the continuing psychological and mental health issues. The NHS continues proactive outreach—there is a screening for trauma programme—and NHS support is available 24 hours a day for all who require it. NHS England has committed up to £50 million to fund long-term health checks and treatment for all those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Latest figures this morning showed that households in hotels and in temporary accommodation add up to 107 households: 107 households will be homeless at Christmas. These are people from the Tower, the walkways and nearby buildings who are unable to come home. Some of those people have had no money. We had one case last week where someone had no money for five months. Somebody else was seen begging at Ladbroke Grove because they have no money. They are not getting the help the Secretary of State believes. Why should we believe a single word he says?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady rightly challenges on behalf of her constituents. What I would say to her very clearly is that 201 households from Grenfell Tower and the Walk need rehousing; 193 have accepted permanent offers and seven have accepted temporary offers; and 179 households have moved in. I accept that there needs to be more effort in relation to emergency accommodation and getting people out of hotels. Progress is being made and we will continue to support the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to do that and get people into permanent homes.

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): It is 18 months after Grenfell and a quarter of families are still not in permanent homes. The problem goes wider. We have found out that 16 out of the 20 tall tower blocks in Kensington, several within full view of Grenfell Tower, still do not have sprinklers, and only 4% of council blocks in London have sprinklers. Sprinklers are mandatory in new tall buildings because they keep people safe, but councils do not have the funds to retrofit social housing blocks. The Government have brushed away every single request for help as non-essential. Why do the Government continue to stigmatise and discriminate against social housing tenants?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady will know that one of the key elements of our social housing Green Paper was to break stigma, and I challenge very firmly to ensure that people in social housing are treated fairly and appropriately. She highlights the issue of sprinklers and is right that in relation to new builds, we have put firm requirements in place. We have said that if local councils require flexibilities to be able to assist with that and the management of those buildings, we will certainly consider that fairly, because our priority is to ensure that people living in high-rise blocks are safe.

Local Government Funding

15. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Whether his Department has received representations on local authority funding from the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The 14 million that the UN identified as in poverty in our country are not just in the Hovis adverts of the industrial heartlands, but in leafy west London. How would the Minister advise Ealing Council to resource the five extra adult social care cases a week that come across its desk and the rising number of child social services cases, when it has had a 64% cut in its budget since the Government came to power?

Rishi Sunak: What I would say to Ealing Council is that it will shortly receive several million pounds extra to spend on its social care priorities. I would also point out that its reserves have increased in the last few years and are available for it to spend as it requires.

Topical Questions

T1. [90811] Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Housing remains the Government’s top priority and the work of my Department continues at pace. The latest figures show that we have delivered more than 222,000 new homes—the highest for a decade—but especially as the temperatures drop, we are taking decisive action to support vulnerable people without a home and have published our rough sleeping strategy delivery plan. Shortly, I will publish our draft local government finance settlement with a new fairer method for allocation to help our councils to deliver high-quality services. Finally, as Jewish families across the country gather to light the candles of Hanukkah, I want to wish everyone celebrating a happy and peaceful Hanukkah.

Dr Johnson: When I find time to do my Christmas shopping, I will do my best to support the local high streets in Lincolnshire. Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what his Department is doing to ensure that our high streets have the support to survive and thrive in our communities?

James Brokenshire: High streets are the hub of our communities, which is why I am delighted that we have announced a £675 million future high streets fund to invest in our high streets, as well as, for example, launching an open doors pilot to bring empty properties back into use, and matching landlords of vacant premises with local community groups to ensure that our high streets are vibrant community places.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): Some debt collection practices, particularly the heavy-handed use of bailiffs, make matters worse, not better, so what is the Secretary of State doing to promote the recent Money Advice Service toolkit initiative? How is he making sure that the way council tax debt is collected does not lead to further financial hardship and stress?
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): I would be happy to look further into that for the hon. Lady. On council tax debt collection, the Government’s position is clear: enforcement should be a last resort, and there is strict guidance in place to ensure the proper collection of council tax, done in a proportionate and civil manner.

T3. [908113] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Following the ban on combustible cladding on new or refurbished buildings on 1 October, it has emerged that over 543 buildings are being built or refurbished with combustible cladding. Worse still, 1,338 buildings have combustible cladding. What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that the ban is enforced and that leaseholders do not pay the cost?

James Brokenshire: Nothing is more important than making sure that people are safe in their homes. I have made it clear that building owners are responsible for the safety of their buildings and they should protect leaseholders from costs. Local authorities have our full support to take enforcement action to make buildings safe, and it is our priority to ensure that people are safe and secure in their homes.

T2. [908112] Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I thank the supported housing Minister for the letter she has just sent me about the case in my constituency. Can I urge her to talk to as many colleagues as possible, because although the case in my constituency, where several residents died, might be one of the worst examples, it is not unique? There is a real problem in this sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): The hon. Lady is absolutely right. It was appalling what was happening in Bristol in that hostel. The Government are committed to protecting vulnerable people. We are developing robust oversight of all supported housing, including homelessness hostels, and are undertaking a review of housing-related support services to ensure that all provision is of good quality and that appropriate support is provided. We are working with local government to support those experiencing rough sleeping and homelessness including with safety measures.

T4. [908114] Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I was very pleased to welcome the high streets Minister to Stoke-on-Trent South recently. Would he agree that towns such as Longton and Fenton in my constituency are exactly the sorts of places that should benefit from the future high streets fund?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jake Berry): It was a pleasure to join my hon. Friend shopping on his local high streets. The Government’s future high streets fund will help high streets to thrive, adapt and change. We will publish the prospectus shortly, and I would encourage Longton and Fenton, as well as the other towns that make up Stoke-on-Trent, to express their interest in the fund.

T6. [908116] Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The Government’s recently announced leasehold consultation is the 53rd announcement on this topic since 2010, and among those previous announcements was a consultation on these exact same issues just 16 months ago. Can the Secretary of State confirm when leaseholders will finally see action, rather than just warm words?

James Brokenshire: We are determined to take action, and the consultation actually contains the technical elements to make sure we get it right and see a practical impact.

T5. [908115] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Plans for the Oxfordshire Cotswolds garden village will see 2,200 homes built near Eynsham on the A40—an already congested road—in west Oxfordshire. Can the Minister please assure me that garden villages are indeed free-standing settlements with their own schools and GP provision and that their connected infrastructure upgrades happen before, not after, the new homes are completed?

The Minister for Housing (Kit Malthouse): I congratulate my hon. Friend and his local authority colleagues on their ambition in welcoming this new garden community to their area. I can confirm that all such communities should be well planned, and include appropriate infrastructure, both hard and soft, so that they are of benefit to the local area, rather than a subtraction.

T7. [908117] Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Given that the Department for Work and Pensions is relying on citizens advice bureaux to deliver universal credit, what conversations has the Secretary of State had with local authorities about their proposed cuts to CABs’ core funding, and has he warned his colleagues that many CABs may cease to exist?

James Brokenshire: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be able to discuss this and other issues when we have the provisional settlement. He will see the support we are giving to local authorities, giving that commitment to local communities and ensuring high-quality services.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What support is the Department giving to councils such as Worcestershire trying to improve services through the enhanced use of technology?

Rishi Sunak: My hon. Friend’s commitment to using technology and public services is well known to the House and is a passion I share. I was delighted that his council, Worcestershire, was involved in three winning bids to our £7.5 million local digital innovation fund. I congratulate it and look forward to seeing the fruits of its innovation.

T8. [908118] Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Cheshire West and Chester Council activates its severe weather protocol for homeless people on the first night of bad weather. Share, the homeless charity in my constituency, would like this to be extended across the country. Will Ministers provide the funding for this extension to happen?

James Brokenshire: I commend the work of the charity in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. We have a £5 million fund open to all local authorities to ensure that more accommodation is now available for these winter months.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Lichfield, Tamworth and Burton Councils are members of two local enterprise partnerships—the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP
and the Staffordshire LEP. Why is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State trying to abandon localism and force them to join just the Staffordshire LEP?

Jake Berry: Our LEP review is about putting our LEPs on a permanent footing as we leave the European Union. Abolishing overlaps is about creating accountability for all LEPs and is part of a wider suite of reforms ensuring that LEP boards reflect the diverse communities they represent by asking them to have at least 50% of their boards made up of local businesswomen.

T9. [908119] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The UN rapporteur on racism looked at the impact of Brexit, and highlighted “the growth in the acceptability of explicit racial, ethnic and religious intolerance.” What are the Government doing to tackle that, and does the Secretary of State agree that recent comments from the Prime Minister have been deeply unhelpful in this regard?

James Brokenshire: It is right that we challenge and tackle religious intolerance, whatever form it takes. I look forward to continuing to work with the Scottish Government and others to underline the positive approach that we take to integration, and ensuring that if there is intolerance and bigotry, it is challenged and shown to be completely unacceptable.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): My right hon. Friend referred to the power that he has given local authorities to carry out emergency work to replace dangerous cladding and charge the owners. However, many owners are able to claim against the leaseholders for the costs under the terms of their leases, and that anomaly defeats the Government’s policy. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how the position might be rectified?

James Brokenshire: I shall be happy to discuss that with my hon. Friend. Many people are meeting those costs, but where that is not happening, I shall also be happy to challenge those concerned and make the point clear.

T10. [908120] John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): The Minister recently attended a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group for disability, and answered a variety of questions. One particular concern that was raised was the need for Changing Places toilets to become more available in everyday work and leisure amenities, such as football grounds. Such a facility was offered recently at Glasgow Celtic’s—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I am trying to help the hon. Gentleman, in an excessively noisy House. Project! Speak up, man.

John McNally: I am standing as tall as I can, Mr Speaker.

Can the Minister give me an update on the Government’s progress in helping to improve the provision of those much-needed facilities?

Rishi Sunak: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s personal leadership on this issue. I commend Celtic football club on its forward thinking, and, indeed, commend all other football clubs that have done the same. I recently met the Changing Places consortium and the campaign group. I share the hon. Gentleman’s passion for ensuring that those with complex disabilities have every opportunity to enjoy a dignified and fulfilling life, and installing more Changing Places is something that we should all support.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Northamptonshire’s police and crime commissioner, Stephen Mold, is very kindly lending Corby’s former police station to Corby Nightlight to help its invaluable work in supporting homeless people in our community. Will my right hon. Friend commend that collaboration, so that when Nightlight moves to its new premises next year, there will be no interruption in service?

James Brokenshire: I am happy to commend that collaboration, and the incredible work that is taking place in Northamptonshire and elsewhere to meet the important challenge of getting people off our streets and dealing with issues relating to homelessness.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): In my local borough of Enfield, children’s services are at breaking point. Can the Secretary of State assure me that adequate funds will be found in the local government financial settlement for those services, and for child and adolescent mental health services?

James Brokenshire: I hope that when the hon. Gentleman hears the statement on the provisional settlement, he will recognise the commitment that we make to children’s as well as adult social services. However, I recognise the pressures that exist. We want to see innovation, and we want to see those services improve. I look forward to discussing the issue with the hon. Gentleman.
Exiting the European Union

3.33 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on exiting the European Union.

We have now had three days of debate on the withdrawal agreement setting out the terms of our departure from the EU, and the political declaration setting out our future relationship after we have left. I have listened very carefully to what has been said, in the Chamber and out of it, by Members on all sides. From listening to those views, it is clear that while there is broad support for many of the key aspects of the deal, on one issue, the Northern Ireland backstop, there remains widespread and deep concern. As a result, if we went ahead and held the vote tomorrow, the deal would be rejected by a significant margin. We will therefore defer the vote scheduled for tomorrow, and will not proceed to divide the House at this time.

I set out in my speech opening the debate last week the reasons why the backstop is a necessary guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland and why, whatever future relationship you want, there is no deal available that does not include the backstop. Behind all those arguments are some inescapable facts: the fact that Northern Ireland shares a land border with another sovereign state; the fact that the hard-won peace that has been built in Northern Ireland over the last two decades has been built around a seamless border; and the fact that Brexit will create a wholly new situation. On 30 March the Northern Ireland-Ireland border will for the first time become the external frontier of the European Union’s single market and customs union. The challenge this poses must be met not with rhetoric but with real and workable solutions. Businesses operate across that border. People live their lives crossing and re-crossing it every day. I have been there and spoken to some of those people; they do not want their everyday lives to change as a result of the decision we have taken. They do not want a return to a hard border. If this House cares about preserving our Union, it must listen to those people, because our Union will only endure if we are prepared to make a compromise, with their consent.

We had hoped that the changes we have secured to the backstop would reassure Members that we could never be trapped in it indefinitely. I hope the House will forgive me if I take a moment to remind it of those changes. The customs element of the backstop is now UK-wide; it no longer splits our country into two customs territories. This also means that the backstop is now an uncomfortable arrangement for the EU, so it will not want it to come into use, or to persist for long if it does.

Both sides are now legally committed to using best endeavours to have our new relationship in place before the end of the implementation period, ensuring the backstop is never used. If our new relationship is not ready, we can now choose to extend the implementation period, further reducing the likelihood of the backstop coming into use. If the backstop ever does come into use, we now do not have to get the new relationship in place to get out of it; alternative arrangements that make use of technology could be put in place instead. The treaty is now clear that the backstop can only ever be temporary, and there is now a termination clause.

But I am clear from what I have heard in this place and from my own conversations that these elements do not offer a sufficient number of colleagues the reassurance that they need. I spoke to a number of EU leaders over the weekend, and in advance of the European Council I will go to see my counterparts in other member states and the leadership of the Council and the Commission. I will discuss with them the clear concerns that this House has expressed.

We are also looking closely at new ways of empowering the House of Commons to ensure that any provision for a backstop has democratic legitimacy and to enable the House to place its own obligations on the Government—[Interruption.] To enable the House to place its own obligations on the Government to ensure that the backstop cannot be in place indefinitely.

Mr Speaker, having spent the best part of two years poring over the detail of Brexit, listening to the public’s ambitions, and, yes, their fears too, and testing the limits of what the other side is prepared to accept, I am in absolutely no doubt that this deal is the right one. [Interruption.] It honours the result of the referendum. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The remainder of the statement must be heard, and I invite the House to hear it with courtesy. For the avoidance of doubt, and also for the benefit of those attending to our proceedings who are not Members of the House, I emphasise that, as per usual, I will call everyone who wants to question the Prime Minister, but meanwhile please hear her.

The Prime Minister: It honours the result of the referendum. It protects jobs, security and our Union. But it also represents the very best deal that is actually negotiable with the EU. I believe in it, as do many Members of this House, and I still believe there is a majority to be won in this House in support of it if I can secure additional reassurance on the question of the backstop, and that is what my focus will be in the days ahead.

But if you take a step back, it is clear that the House faces a much more fundamental question. Does this House want to deliver Brexit? [Hon. Members: “No!”] That is a clear message from the Scottish National party. If the House does want to deliver Brexit, does it want to do so through reaching an agreement with the EU? If the answer is yes, and I believe that is the answer of the majority of this House, then we all have to ask ourselves whether we are prepared to make a compromise, because there will be no enduring and successful Brexit without some compromise on both sides of the debate.

Many of the most controversial aspects of this deal, including the backstop, are simply inescapable facts of having a negotiated Brexit. Those Members who continue to disagree need to shoulder the responsibility of advocating an alternative solution that can be delivered, and do so without ducking its implications. So if you want a second referendum to overturn the result of the first, be honest that this risks dividing the country again, when as a House we should be striving to bring it back together. If you want to remain part of the single market and the customs union, be open that this would require free movement, rule taking across the economy and ongoing financial contributions—none of which
are in my view compatible with the result of the referendum. If you want to leave without a deal, be up front that in the short term, this would cause significant economic damage to parts of our country who can least afford to bear the burden. I do not believe that any of those courses of action command a majority in this House. But notwithstanding that fact, for as long as we fail to agree a deal, the risk of an accidental no deal increases. So the Government will step up their work in preparation for that potential outcome, and the Cabinet will hold further discussions on it this week.

The vast majority of us accept the result of the referendum and want to leave with a deal. We have a responsibility to discharge. If we will the ends, we must also will the means. I know that Members across the House appreciate how important that responsibility is. I am very grateful to all Members on this side of the House—and a few on the other side, too—who have backed this deal and spoken up for it. Many others, I know, have been wrestling with their consciences, particularly over the question of the backstop. They are seized of the need to face up to the challenge posed by the Irish border, but genuinely concerned about the consequences. I have listened. I have heard those concerns and I will now do everything I possibly can to secure further assurances.

If I may, I will conclude on a personal note. On the morning after the referendum two and a half years ago, I knew that we had witnessed a defining moment for our democracy. Places that did not get a lot of attention were making their voices heard and saying that they wanted things to change. I knew in that moment that Parliament had to deliver for them. Of course that does not just mean delivering Brexit. It means working across all areas—building a stronger economy, improving public services, tackling social injustices—to make this a country that truly works for everyone.

The Prime Minister: I mean working across all areas to make this a country that truly works for everyone, and a country where nowhere and nobody is left behind. These matters are too important to be afterthoughts in our politics. They deserve to be at the centre of our thinking, but that can happen only if we get Brexit done and get it done right.

Even though I voted remain, from the moment I took up the responsibility of being Prime Minister of this great country, I have known that my duty is to honour the result of that vote. And I have been just as determined to protect the jobs that put food on the tables of working families and the security partnerships that keep each one of us safe. That is what this deal does. It gives us control of our borders, our money and our laws. It protects jobs, security and our Union. It is the right deal for Britain. I am determined to do all I can to secure the reassurances this House requires, to get this deal over the line and deliver for the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

3.45 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for providing a copy of the statement before we met here this afternoon. We are in an extremely serious and unprecedented situation. The Government have lost control of events and are in complete disarray. It has been evident for weeks that the Prime Minister’s deal does not have the confidence of this House, yet she ploughed on regardless, reiterating “This is the only deal available.” Can she be clear with the House: is she seeking changes to the deal, or mere reassurances? Does she therefore accept the statement from the European Commission at lunchtime, saying that it was the “only deal possible. We will not renegotiate—our position has… not changed”?

Ireland’s Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, has said it is “not possible” to renegotiate the Irish border backstop, stating that it was the Prime Minister’s own red lines that made the backstop necessary. So can the Prime Minister be clear: is she now ready to drop further red lines in order to make progress? Can the Prime Minister confirm that the deal presented to this House is not off the table, but will be re-presented with a few assurances? Bringing back the same botched deal, either next week or in January—and can she be clear on the timing?—will not change its fundamental flaws or the deeply held objections right across this House, which go far wider than the backstop alone.

This a bad deal for Britain, a bad deal for our economy and a bad deal for our democracy. Our country deserves better than this. The deal damages our economy, and it is not just the Opposition saying that; the Government’s own analysis shows that this deal would make us worse off. If the Prime Minister cannot be clear that she can and will renegotiate the deal, she must make way. If she is going back to Brussels, she needs to build a consensus in this House. Since it appears that business has changed for the next two days, it seems not only possible but necessary that this House debates the negotiating mandate that the Prime Minister takes to Brussels. There is no point at all in this Prime Minister bringing back the same deal again, which is clearly not supported by this House.

We have endured two years of shambolic negotiations. Red lines have been boldly announced and then cast aside. We are now on our third Brexit Secretary, and it appears that each one of them has been excluded from these vital negotiations. We were promised a precise and substantive document, and we got a vague 26-page wish list. This Government have become the first Government in British history to be held in contempt of Parliament.

The Government are in disarray. Uncertainty is building for business. People are in despair at the state of these failed negotiations, and concerned about what it means for their jobs, their livelihoods and their communities. The fault for that lies solely at the door of this shambolic Government. The Prime Minister is trying to buy herself one last chance to save this deal. If she does not take on board the fundamental changes required, she must make way for those who can.

The Prime Minister: I will respond fairly briefly. The right hon. Gentleman appears to argue, on the one hand, that it is not possible to change the deal because the EU has said that this is the only deal and, on the other hand, that the only thing he would accept is the deal being renegotiated. He quoted the European Union as saying this is the only deal, and he went on to say that the whole deal needs to be renegotiated.
The fundamental question that Members of this House have to ask themselves is whether they wish to deliver Brexit and honour the result of the referendum. All the analysis shows that, if we wish to deliver Brexit, if we wish to honour the result of the referendum, the deal that does that, and that best protects jobs and our economy, is the deal the Government have put forward.

Mr Speaker: Order. Everybody will have his or her chance, but the questions have been put and the answers must similarly be heard.

The Prime Minister: That is the fundamental question for Members of this House: to deliver on and honour the result of the referendum, but to do it in a way that protects jobs and our economy. That is what this deal does.

The Leader of the Opposition talks about a number of issues. He wants to be in the customs union such that the single market and free movement would have to be accepted. He refuses to accept that any deal requires a backstop, because that is our commitment to the people of Northern Ireland. He claims that he wants to negotiate trade deals, yet he wants to be fully in the customs union, which would not enable us to negotiate those trade deals. Finally, he talks about the uncertainty for British business. I can tell him that the biggest uncertainty for British business lies not in this deal but on the Front Bench of the Labour party.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I look to the Father of the House, and then other colleagues, I want to say the following. Although the Government’s intention to halt the forthcoming debate at this inordinately late stage has been widely leaked to the media in advance, I felt it only appropriate to hear what is proposed before advising the House. Halting the debate, after no fewer than 164 colleagues have taken the trouble to contribute, will be thought by many Members of this House to be deeply discourteous. Indeed, in the hours since news of this intention emerged, many colleagues from across the House have registered that view to me in the most forceful terms.

Having taken the best procedural advice, colleagues should be informed that there are two ways of doing this. The first and, in democratic terms, the infinitely preferable way is for a Minister to move at the outset of the debate that the debate be adjourned. This will give the House the opportunity to express its view in a vote on whether or not it wishes the debate to be brought to a premature and inconclusive end. I can reassure Ministers that I would be happy to accept such a motion so that the House can decide.

The alternative is for the Government unilaterally to decline to move today’s business, which means not only that the House is deprived of its opportunity to vote upon the substance of the debate tomorrow but that it is given no chance to express its view today on whether the debate should or should not be allowed to continue.

I politely suggest that, in any courteous, respectful and mature environment, allowing the House to have its say on this matter would be the right and, dare I say it, the obvious course to take. Let us see if those who have assured this House and the public, over and over again, that this supremely important vote is going to take place tomorrow, without fail, wish to rise to the occasion.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): On the question of Europe, this House is divided not just into parties; it is divided into factions. It becomes clear that, at the moment, there is no predictable majority for any single course of action going forward. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that no other Governments are going to start negotiations with us on any new arrangement while the British continue to explore what exactly it is they can get a parliamentary majority to agree to?

Furthermore, we are strictly bound, quite rightly, to the Good Friday agreement and the issue of a permanently open border in Ireland. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is particular folly for a large faction in this House to continue with their argument that we should insist to the other Governments that the British will have a unilateral right to declare an end to that open border at a time of their choosing? That is why the backstop remains inevitable.

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree. I think none of the alternative arrangements that have been floated and suggested in this House would actually command a majority of this House. My right hon. and learned Friend is also right that we retain our absolute commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement and to the commitments that the United Kingdom Government made within that agreement. Any agreement that was being negotiated with the European Union, be that either of the other two options that are normally quoted—the Norway option in some form and the Canada option in some form—would require negotiation, could risk the possibility of there being a period of time when that relationship was not in place and, therefore, would indeed require a backstop.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of the statement, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the benefit of your words on how we could proceed.

The events of the past few hours have highlighted that this is a Government in a total state of collapse. The Prime Minister has been forced to pull tomorrow’s vote in a stunning display of pathetic cowardice. The vote tomorrow night would have shown the will of this House, but this Government are focused on saving the Prime Minister’s job and her party. Instead of doing what is right for these countries, she is abdicating her responsibility.

The Prime Minister’s deal will make people poorer. It will lead to years of further uncertainty and difficult negotiation, with no guarantee that a trade deal can even be struck. It does not have the support of those on her Back Benches; indeed, it has no support from the majority of those on the Benches across this place, no support from the Scottish Parliament and no support from the Welsh Assembly. Why has it taken the Prime Minister this long to face up to reality? Her deal was dead in the water long before this morning. Last week, it was this deal or no deal. She now needs to be clear with this House about what has changed.
Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, but yet again our views are being ignored, as they have been throughout this disastrous and incompetent Brexit process. Back in 2014, Scotland was promised the strength and security of the UK, but the reality has been Westminster collapse and chaos. We were promised an equal partnership, but we have been treated with contempt.

The Prime Minister has lost the confidence of those on her own Benches, and she has failed to convince this House of her plan for exiting the EU. We simply cannot go on like this. It is clear that the Prime Minister is incapable of taking decisions about the future and that Downing Street cannot negotiate any more—either with the EU or with those on the Tory Back Benches. What the Prime Minister is really scared of is allowing this House to determine the way forward and allowing the public the opportunity to remain in the EU. She knows she has lost, but she is still wasting precious time. We need the Prime Minister to be clear about when the House will vote on this deal.

This Government and the Prime Minister have failed. It is time they got out of the way. Prime Minister, Members across this House do not want your deal. The EU does not want to renegotiate. Is not the only way to break this deadlock to put it to the people?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady asked what I have been doing. What I have been doing is listening to Members of this House who have identified a very specific concern with the deal that was negotiated. As I said, we negotiated within that deal a number of aspects to address the issue around the permanence or otherwise of the backstop. I had hoped those would give sufficient confidence to Members of this House. It has proved, in discussions, that they have not, and therefore we are going to work to get those further reassurances that I want to ensure, with other Members of the House—

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) When’s the vote?

The Prime Minister: If the shadow Foreign Secretary would just have a little patience. The date of the vote was one of the questions asked by the Scottish National party and I am going to address that matter. The responsibility of this Government is to deliver on the promise that there should be a backstop.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): After the fiasco today, the Government have really lost all authority. Let me just say that my colleagues and I will fully support the Leader of the Opposition if he now proceeds to a no-confidence vote, as duty surely calls. Specifically on the statement, may I ask the Prime Minister: how many of the Heads of Government whom she telephoned over the weekend ha ve indicated that they would consider the Irish backstop dispensable?

The Prime Minister: The discussions that we have consistently had, as I have indicated in my references to other arrangements, are that there should be a backstop to ensure that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. The concern that has been raised predominantly by colleagues is the question of the permanence or otherwise of that backstop, and the need to ensure that it can brought to an end and will not continue indefinitely. A number of the European leaders I have spoken to have indicated that they are open to discussions to find a way to provide reassurance to Members of this House on that point.
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Prime Minister knows that the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration both cover many legal issues beyond the backstop, important and vital though that is. Those issues include the European Court, control over our own laws and questions relating to compatibility with the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Under the ministerial code, there is an absolute obligation to consult the Attorney General formally and in good time before committing to critical decisions that involve legal considerations. Under the order of the House of, I think, 4 December, the Government must publish in full the Attorney General’s advice on both the withdrawal agreement and the framework. So far, the only advice that has been published is on the Northern Ireland protocol. Did the Prime Minister seek the Attorney General’s advice under the code, on both these matters in good time, or did she not? If she did seek his advice, why has it not been published?

The Prime Minister: I think my hon. Friend has asked me variations of that question each time I have made a statement recently. I am clear that the Government undertake their responsibilities in relation to the seeking of legal advice entirely properly and appropriately. Of course, the Government published a full legal position on the withdrawal agreement, and that contained more detail than Governments have previously published on any such occasion or in any similar event. Not only have we done that, but the Attorney General came to the House, made a statement and took many questions from Members on these issues.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Frankly, what the Prime Minister says today simply is not credible, is it? This is an impossible position for the Government to find themselves in. The Prime Minister says that she is listening, but she talks about reassurances and assurances. Does she not get it by now that the withdrawal agreement legally binding text is unacceptable to this House? She cannot pretend and go on defending the deal when she knows that that vote been taken tomorrow, the deal would have been overwhelmingly defeated. Please, Prime Minister, really do start to listen and come back with changes to the withdrawal agreement, or it will be voted down.

The Prime Minister: The purpose of the announcement today that we will defer the vote and return to this matter is precisely to be able to go and discuss with other European leaders, the Council and the Commission those further reassurances that the House requires on the issues that Members are concerned about, notably those further reassurances that the House requires on other European leaders, the Council and the Commission.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I encourage my right hon. Friend to ignore the Opposition’s mockery; I would always prefer a Prime Minister who will listen. Has she also heard the concern of West Midlands manufacturers that leaving with no deal would cause unnecessary economic damage? The best way to avoid that is to leave with a deal.

The Prime Minister: We did indeed listen to manufacturers in the West Midlands and up and down the country as we were putting the deal together. That desire to protect people’s jobs and livelihoods while respecting and delivering on the result of the referendum has underpinned the deal that we have, and this deal does exactly that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister challenged others to be up front about what they want, but she needs to be up front, too, about the fact that it was her red lines that created the problem with the border in Northern Ireland, which led to the backstop and which has brought her to the House of Commons today in such a weak position. Given the answer that she gave a moment ago, will she tell the House whether, of the EU leaders that she spoke to over the weekend, there was a single one who indicated that they were prepared to renegotiate article 20 of the backstop protocol, because, in the absence of any such commitment, is not cancelling tomorrow’s vote merely postponing the inevitable?

The Prime Minister: The issue on which we were very clear with the European Union in relation to the Northern Ireland border was that there could not be a customs border down the Irish sea. In February, the EU’s proposals were that exactly that should happen. By October, we had persuaded it to enable a UK-wide customs territory to be in the protocol rather than a Northern Ireland-wide customs territory. That was the key issue in relation to the border that we had set as something that was unacceptable to the United Kingdom and we negotiated that out of the proposal.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I entirely share my right hon. Friend’s concern about the maintenance of the Belfast agreement, the peace process in Northern Ireland and an open border, but is not the reality of what has happened, which this Brexit that is being negotiated highlights with total starkness, that, far from recovering sovereignty as has been proclaimed, we are in fact about to part with it, replacing a bilateral agreement with the Irish Government, sustained by referendums on both sides of the border, with an arrangement on which no one has been consulted and that ruthlessly undermines our sovereign rights? In those circumstances, and mindful of the fact that she faces many difficulties here that are not of her making, surely we should go back to the public and ask them whether that is what they want, and offer them the alternative of remaining in the EU.

The Prime Minister: Every Member of this House who has raised this issue of going back to the public on this matter needs to consider very carefully the impact that that would have. I believe that it would lead to a significant loss of faith in our democracy, and to many people questioning the role of this House and the role of Members within this House. We gave people the decision. The people have made that decision; we should deliver on it.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Nothing has changed in the level of parliamentary concern about the Prime Minister’s deal since last week, but she still sent her Ministers and her official spokesperson out at 11 this morning to say that this vote was 100% going ahead, and yet we still, even now, do not know when she wants to bring this vote back, or even what she wants the deal to be. Does she not realise how chaotic and ridiculous this makes our country look? Given the
The Prime Minister: No, I should be clear with the right hon. Lady and with the House that I consulted the Cabinet late-morning about the decision to defer the vote. That decision was taken because of an understanding of a concern that Members of this House have expressed in relation to the backstop. It was taken, having discussed with Members of the House whether the reassurances that had previously been negotiated by the UK Government were sufficient to allay those concerns. It is that issue on which we will be going back to European Union and it is that issue on which we will be seeking those further reassurances. I say once again that this House has a responsibility, and there will come a point when it will be up to every Member of this House to determine whether they will accept the result of the referendum and deliver a deal for the British people that ensures a smooth exit from Brexit and that protects jobs and livelihoods.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): Mr Speaker, as one of the 164 Members you referred to who have already spoken in this debate, may I assure the Prime Minister that I think that it is more important that we end up with the right deal for this country? What is most important for Parliament is that it is seen to take its responsibility and, if possible, agree a deal. Given that, as she rightly identifies, the Irish backstop has been the one element that has discouraged very many people across the House from supporting this deal, will she give the House an update on her conversations with European leaders over the last few days on whether progress is possible on that, and therefore can she give us some assurance that Parliament will be able to fulfil its responsibilities and agree a deal?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. Of course, the speeches of all Members who have already participated in the debate continue to be an important contribution to the debate on this subject. Having spoken to European leaders, I can give my right hon. Friend the assurance that they are open to discussions with us on this issue. I am confident that we will be able to see some further changes. Of course, that will be the matter for further negotiations.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): The control of the timing of the backstop by the European Union hands enormous amount of negotiating power to the other side in this negotiation. Without change, it jeopardises the control of our money, borders, regulatory independence and, yes, our constitution too. It must therefore be time-limited under our control, and that must be legally enforceable. Is that what the Prime Minister is seeking?

The Prime Minister: The issue of the length of time for which the backstop could or should be in place, if it is ever used—once again, it is the intention of neither side that it be used—is a matter that is already addressed in the withdrawal agreement. People here are concerned about the extent to which they can trust those assurances within the withdrawal agreement, which is why it is important to go back and get further reassurances.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The Prime Minister has changed her mind about the vote and about whether the backstop can be amended. If she can change her mind, why will she not just check whether the British people have changed their minds since they voted two years ago?

The Prime Minister: Does the hon. Lady honestly think that if we were to have a further referendum and it came out with a different result, people would not then say that we should have a third referendum to find out exactly what the result was? And if we had a second referendum with the same result, I also wonder whether the hon. Lady would still be asking for a third referendum. This Parliament gave people the choice and the people decided. They voted; we should deliver on it.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Far from being frit, I think this Prime Minister has great courage in coming back to face this House and delay the vote in an effort to get the best possible deal for this country. Quite frankly, some people who voted in the referendum did so for the first time, and they decided to accept the result no matter on which side they voted. Surely we should not be letting them down; they will see little point in exercising their vote again if the result is not honoured and we call a second referendum.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Those people, many of whom voted for the first time at all or the first time in decades when they voted in the referendum in 2016, will indeed question why they should vote in future if this Parliament does not deliver on that vote. As she says, people across the country, whether they voted leave or remain, are saying, “This was the result: let’s just get on with it; let’s deliver it.”

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): In the light of this morning’s European Court judgment pursued by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and myself, which clarified that all options are available for our country, may I make the Prime Minister a sincere offer in the hope that she will at least keep her options open? If she takes her Brexit proposal back to the British public for a final say, and also allows the public the
chance to stay in the European Union, she can be assured of significant support from many Opposition Members.

**The Prime Minister:** I appreciate the sincerity with which the right hon. Gentleman has put his question and made his point, but I do genuinely feel absolutely that it is important for this House to deliver on the vote that took place in 2016.

**Mr Speaker:** The Prime Minister has just rather generously, but I fear erroneously, elevated the hon. Gentleman to the Privy Council. I fear that it is probably not a bankable assurance, but you never know.

**Anna Soubry** (Broxtowe) (Con): Prime Minister, you will recall how a number of us on these Benches urged you—indeed, begged you—to reach out across these Benches, across this House and, indeed, across our country and find a compromise and a consensus before you laid down your red lines and before you began your negotiations. After three days of debating, and given the statement of the Commission this lunchtime, it is clear that nothing has changed and nothing will change. But the thing that is changing is the view of the British people. [H. Members: “No, it’s not.”] I know it is nearly the pantomime season, but oh yes, it has. [H. Members: “Oh no, it hasn’t.”] That is why honourable—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. The right hon. Lady is giving eloquent and full expression to her views, which is not entirely unknown, but she must be heard and she will be heard. I am not having any Member of this House shouted down. That is not acceptable and it will not happen. Amen.

**Anna Soubry:** That is why the hon. Members for Houghton and Sunderland South (Bridget Phillipson) and for Redcar (Anna Turley)—two of the highest voting leave areas—are now supporting a people’s vote, and rightly so, because their constituents are entitled to change their minds and young people are entitled to have a say about their future, because, at the end of the day, they will bear the burden of Brexit most. I would urge the Prime Minister: we have found an impasse in this House; it is time now to take this back to the people and have a people’s vote.

**The Prime Minister:** The United Kingdom does not have a long tradition of holding referendums. There was the Scottish referendum. There was a referendum back in 1975 on joining the European Economic Community. There was a referendum in 2016 on whether or not to leave the European Union. In all those votes, the Government have taken a very clear view that the result of those referendums should be respected, and I believe that this referendum should be respected as well.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The people outside these walls see a shambles of a Government. With that in mind, we will support the Leader of the Opposition if he, as he should, tables a motion of no confidence. As of this morning’s European Court of Justice ruling, it is within the Prime Minister’s gift personally to take no deal off the table. Will she today rule out the threat of no deal and, should it prove necessary, be prepared to revoke article 50?

**The Prime Minister:** The European Court of Justice clearly has determined that it is possible to unilaterally revoke article 50, but the point it has made is that nobody should think that revoking article 50 is a short-term solution or short-term extension of article 50. Revoking article 50 would mean going back on the vote of the referendum and staying in the European Union.

**Sir Oliver Heald** (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): When I spoke in the debate, I made it clear that I was supporting the Prime Minister but had concerns about the backstop and its indefinite nature. Given that the EU has already recognised that this is a temporary arrangement, and our Attorney General has said that it would not be forever and there are means of challenging it legally, does she agree that it would be helpful if our European partners gave more clarity about how long it would take for us to leave the backstop in the event that talks break down?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right. The European Union has already indicated that the backstop is temporary in nature. It is therefore entirely reasonable to ask the EU to give further clarification about that temporary aspect of the backstop and the ability to bring it to an end.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): In my 27 years in this House, I have rarely seen a Government in such a farrago of chaos as the Prime Minister has caused with her negotiations. Last week, she said:

“I caution hon. Members that not only has the EU made it clear that the withdrawal agreement cannot be reopened—we have agreed the deal and the deal is there”.

—[Official Report, 4 December 2018; Vol. 65, c. 755.]

She has now abandoned the vote and come back to the House to tell us that somehow the unopenable deal is open again. She is seeking assurances that will not be worth the paper they are written on, because she has done her legal deal already. Why on earth does she not just abandon this dancing on the head of a pin and let us vote on this appalling deal?

**The Prime Minister:** We have negotiated with the European Union a deal in two parts: the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on our future relationship. One aspect of the withdrawal agreement has raised particular concerns. That aspect is already dealt with in the withdrawal agreement through various assurances about the temporary nature of the backstop. In discussions with colleagues, it is clear that those assurances are not sufficient, and we therefore go back to seek further reassurance on the temporary nature of the backstop.

**John Redwood** (Wokingham) (Con): Many people think that signing away large sums of money would badly undermine our negotiating position on the Irish backstop and the future partnership. Will my right hon. Friend reassert the House of Lords findings that we do not owe this money, and nothing is agreed until everything is agreed?

**The Prime Minister:** My right hon. Friend has pressed that point before. I recognise that the House of Lords came out with an opinion, but there are other legal opinions in relation to the application of various aspects
of international law on the treaty that say that we do indeed have legal obligations in financial terms. I believe that, as a country, we should meet those obligations.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Prime Minister has said that she does not want a second vote because it risks dividing the country again, but I remind her that the United Kingdom is not a country; it is a Union of four nations. That Union is already divided, because two out of those four nations voted to remain. She has conceded this afternoon that she cannot get the House to support her deal. If she really believes in the deal, why will she not have the courage of her convictions and put that deal to the four nations of the UK, giving them a choice between her deal or remaining in the European Union, which the Court of Justice said this morning is possible? Why not put it back to the people, Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: I can recognise why somebody representing the SNP might have a desire to try to change the result of a referendum when it has taken place, but I say to the hon. and learned Lady that I have answered the question in relation to going back to the people on a number of occasions this afternoon and on other occasions. I have not been lax in coming to this House and standing up in this Chamber to answer questions on this matter. I also point out to her that we entered the European Economic Community as one United Kingdom, and we will be leaving as one United Kingdom.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend that I think leaving without a deal will be incredibly bad news for this country, not least for manufacturing businesses across the midlands? Will she confirm that the only way that will happen is if people refuse the deal that is on offer—we do leave on 29 March?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The only way to ensure that there is no deal is to have a deal. The deal on the table is a good deal for the UK, and we will be leaving on 29 March next year.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said that she is going back for more reassurances on the backstop. Does she accept that those reassurances, no matter how strong, will not be legal? Does she not think that she would be better able to negotiate if the EU knew that this House had overwhelmingly voted against the deal?

The Prime Minister: I think the fact that I have indicated that it is necessary to go back has sent a clear message to the European Union about the importance of engaging on this particular issue and ensuring that there is the level of assurance that is required by Members of this House that is sufficient for Members of this House to believe that they can have the confidence that the backstop is not indefinite. It is that indefinite—potentially indefinite—nature of the backstop, should it come into place, that has been raising concerns for all Members of this House, and I believe that it is that that we should be addressing particularly.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): On 7 March, President Tusk offered the UK a wide-ranging free trade agreement, which foundered on the issue of the Northern Ireland border. It is therefore exasperating, today, that the Prime Minister is still talking about the backstop as the only solution to this border. She has heard from the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds). This is a breach of the Belfast agreement principle of consent, and it is even a breach of the articles of the Act of Union in 1801. Since then, she has met international customs experts and she has met a Nobel prize winner, my right hon. Friend Lord Trimble. She knows that existing techniques and existing customs procedures can continue to deliver a seamless border. Will she please, at this late stage, put the backstop and all its horrors behind her, go back to the European Union and take up the offer made by President Tusk, using these modern, seamless customs techniques?

The Prime Minister: The offer that the European Union put to the United Kingdom was for a Canada-style free trade agreement for Great Britain, because to deal with the seamless border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, it wanted to separate Northern Ireland away from the customs territory of Great Britain and therefore not have a single UK customs territory. In relation to the technical issues—the technical solutions—that my right hon. Friend refers to, yes, indeed, and we continue to engage with those who put these forward. The question is not just about no physical infrastructure on the border; the question is about the extent to which people on both sides of the border are able to continue to lead their lives as they do today, with no increased barriers or encumbrances to their leading their lives in that way. That is what I believe delivers on the seamless border, which does indeed underpin the Belfast/Good Friday agreement.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in her statement that this is the best deal and the only deal, and it is time for all of us in this place to face up to our responsibilities. We are ready to do that, Prime Minister, so put this deal to a vote in this House, and if you are not prepared to do that, put it to a vote of the people.

The Prime Minister: I have made it clear that we are deferring the vote. We will seek these further—[HON. MEMBERS: “Till when?”] We will seek these further reassurances. On the vote of the people, the right hon. Gentleman has heard my answer to that question several times already this afternoon.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How do we know that the exit date of 29 March will not be put off as well?

The Prime Minister: We have put it into legislation, and this Government are committed to delivering exiting on 29 March.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister be clear that she is seeking an exchange of letters of reassurance with the EU, not a change to the text of the withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister: I said earlier that nothing is off the table. There are a range of ways in which I believe we can find reassurances for Members of this House. The task is to find sufficient reassurance that gives the confidence to Members of this House that the backstop will not be indefinite.
Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Successful renegotiations require trust and credibility. Given the Prime Minister’s breathtaking U-turn today, I put it to her that she has lost the trust and credibility of the House, lost the trust and credibility of the country and, most importantly, lost the trust and credibility of the European Union.

The Prime Minister: No. What was very clear in my discussions with European leaders is that we will be able to have discussions with them—myself and the UK Government—on this issue.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): The Prime Minister told MPs to be honest about the options we face, but she has never spelt out to her Back Benchers or the public that any type of Brexit deal has always been a choice—damaging our economy and having a hard border in Northern Ireland or ending up as a rule taker. Is it not this failure that has led to this crisis? And she only has herself to blame.

The Prime Minister: No. We have been clear about the need for what we believe is right for the United Kingdom, which is to negotiate a bespoke deal that is neither the Norway/EEA option, which is at one end of the spectrum that the European Union offered in the first place, nor the Canada-style deal for Great Britain, with Northern Ireland carved out in a separate customs territory, which is the other end of the spectrum that the EU proposed. The political declaration does indeed include a trade agreement with a free trade area at its heart, with no tariffs, no quantitative restrictions and ambitious proposals in relation to the customs border.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The Prime Minister will be well aware that the backstop was just one of a number of grave concerns that Back Benchers have about the draft withdrawal agreement, so can she assure the House that she will seek to reduce, for example, the role of the European Court of Justice and change the text of the withdrawal agreement accordingly?

The Prime Minister: I hope I can give some further reassurance to my right hon. Friend. In discussions with a number of colleagues, there seems to be a misunderstanding about the role of the European Court of Justice. What we will have in our future relationship is that we will end the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The European Court of Justice will not be the final arbiter of the withdrawal agreement. There has been, I think, some misunderstanding of the reference in the withdrawal agreement to the point that the arbitration panel that deals with disputes will be able to ask the European Court of Justice for its opinion on its interpretation of EU law, but the dispute would be determined by the arbitration panel and not by the European Court of Justice.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister might not know, but I have been in this House for nearly 40 years. If I had made my speech later today, I would have told her that my sacred duty as a Member of Parliament, overriding everything else, is to come here and look after the health, welfare and future prosperity of my constituents. I have been sympathetic to the situation that she finds herself in, but I have lost that sympathy because what I understand now, from today’s decision, is that she has actually been captured by the far-right, Brexit wing of her party—the so-called European Research Group, which does not believe in research. She is a captive of this unpleasant, nationalist, populist group in the Conservative party.

The Prime Minister: No. The concern about the potential indefinite nature of the backstop is one that has been expressed by a wide range of Members of Parliament, including some on the Opposition Benches.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I very much hope for the sake of this country that the Prime Minister will prevail in the difficult negotiations that lie ahead. I hope that as she enters those negotiations she will be sustained by the widespread admiration—not just on these Benches, not just among Conservatives, but in the country as a whole—for the dignity and the perseverance she has shown.

The Prime Minister: I think the best answer to my right hon. Friend is to say thank you. And I will be.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Does the Prime Minister think that going back and changing minutiae about the backstop will actually make any difference to the kind of people on the Government Benches who like to go around calling themselves Aslan and circle around her head caring nothing for this country, only their own position? This backstop rejig can-kicking will make absolutely no difference to those people and they know it, so what is the plan?

The Prime Minister: What people are concerned about is the potential indefinite nature of the backstop. There is no intention for it to be indefinite. There is no intention for it to be used in the first place. That is a genuine concern that is held by people across this House. I think it is entirely right that the Government address it.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The Prime Minister rightly talks about listening to young people and first-time voters. Does she accept that they voted overwhelmingly to remain? They look at what is happening in this House and they see that this deal is Brexit, warts and all—this is as good as it gets. Is it not time, now that we know what Brexit actually looks like as opposed to some fantasy version of Brexit, that those people get the chance to vote on Brexit reality rather than Brexit fantasy?

The Prime Minister: I think my hon. Friend has captured by the far-right, Brexit wing of her party—the so-called European Research Group, which does not believe in research. She is a captive of this unpleasant, nationalist, populist group in the Conservative party.

The Prime Minister: I hope I can give some further reassurance to my right hon. Friend. In discussions with a number of colleagues, there seems to be a misunderstanding about the role of the European Court of Justice. What we will have in our future relationship is that we will end the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The European Court of Justice will not be the final arbiter of the withdrawal agreement. There has been, I think, some misunderstanding of the reference in the withdrawal agreement to the point that the arbitration panel that deals with disputes will be able to ask the European Court of Justice for its opinion on its interpretation of EU law, but the dispute would be determined by the arbitration panel and not by the European Court of Justice.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): This is a political challenge for the Prime Minister, not a substantive one. It seems that the Prime Minister’s strategy is now to try to placate further the ERG wing
of her own party. Is it not the truth that they are insatiable? They will never be satisfied. Given that the parliamentary maths are now so difficult, to really break the deadlock requires different parliamentary maths and a general election.

The Prime Minister: What the country requires is for us to continue to work to get a good deal over the line, so we can deliver on Brexit in a way that honours the referendum, and protects jobs and livelihoods across the country. Further uncertainty and division will do nothing to help people who are looking to their futures.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Essential to any successful negotiator is the ability to walk away. The backstop takes that from us. How can the Prime Minister change that?

The Prime Minister: First, we are continuing with the no-deal preparations. As I said earlier, the Cabinet will meet to discuss those further. Secondly, in any circumstance we need to ensure there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. It is finding ways we can do that in a way that enables us to be free in a future relationship which is the best possible deal for this country. That is what we are looking for and striving to achieve.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister talks about faith in democracy, but I think a lot of people looking at this shambles today, whether they voted leave or remain, will see a Prime Minister who has tried to keep economic advice from this House and from the public, has tried to keep legal advice from this House and the public, and a Government who have been found in contempt. She is trying to prevent us having a vote on her own deal and she is trying to prevent us having a vote on whether or not she should be able to have a vote on that deal or not. People will be looking at this aghast. I have spoken to many leave voters in my constituency. I deeply respect and understand the reasons why they voted leave in 2016, but many of them have changed their minds. They are looking at this and they are saying to me that they want a chance to have a say on what is before them: Brexit reality, not Brexit fantasy. That is why we need a people's vote.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is wrong, of course, because we did provide an economic analysis for this House. We published an economic analysis, and we published the legal position in relation to the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. That has been available for Members of this House. He talks about the vote as if there is no vote in the future—[HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] We are deferring the vote while we have these further discussions with the EU.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The Prime Minister cannot fail to have noticed that there are plenty of challenges—legal challenges—surrounding Brexit, including whether or not the referendum was legally binding and whether or not we could take article 50 off the table. My concern is that any reassurances or assurances given will only be subject to legal challenges down the road if they are not legally binding. Therefore, assurances and reassurances will not make a difference to how I feel about the flaws in this particular withdrawal.

The Prime Minister: I entirely recognise the point that my hon. Friend is making about the legal position in relation to any assurances that are achieved. Obviously, we are at the beginning of the discussions with the European Union on this matter, but what I want to ensure is that Members like my hon. Friend are able to have the confidence in those assurances when they come back from the European Union.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): There is no one currently in the House who has been Prime Minister. Does she appreciate that other Prime Ministers under pressure did not delay their legislation? Margaret Thatcher did not delay after the poll tax. Tony Blair did not delay the Iraq war decision. John Major did not delay Maastricht. Prime Minister—[ Interruption. ] She knows that when the politics of this place are broken, you either resign or go back to the people in a general election or a referendum. No one gets to play for extra time before the game is over.

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I think the whole premise of his question was wrong, and if he looks back at the history of Governments in this country, he will see that.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): The Prime Minister in her statement said that the Government will step up their work in preparation for a possible no-deal outcome, and this is very important. She said the same last month, so I am wondering whether my right hon. Friend could tell us at least one action that is now taking place that was not taking place last month.

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am very happy to say to my right hon. Friend that we have indeed been stepping up the action that has been taken. Since I said that, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has taken action in writing to over 140,000 businesses, and the Department of Health and Social Care has written to pharmaceutical companies, for example, on the potential impact of no deal on medicines and devices.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The Prime Minister has come to the House to talk to us about honesty on the day when she is trying to pull a vote which she said would not be pulled in order to try to change a deal which she said could not be changed. Is it not time to be honest about the commitments that this country has made to no hard border, to the Good Friday agreement and to not doing huge damage to our economy? She can talk to the European Union about the backstop all day, but any deal that respects those commitments will require us to sign up to a set of common European rules over which we will no longer have any say by dint of the fact of Brexit. Is it not time to be honest both with her Back Benchers and the public about this, instead of trying to square unsquareable circles or even worse, hide the facts of this fundamental choice until after we are out?

The Prime Minister: We are committed to no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. We are committed to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. We are committed to a deal which actually delivers on the protection of people’s jobs and livelihoods. That is the deal that we have negotiated. The right hon. Gentleman refers to the issue of how one can operate on a trading
basis with the European Union in relation to rules that the European Union set. Of course, what the Government set out was a proposal, and this is reflected in the balance identified in the political declaration—that if you want to restrict, reduce, or remove customs checks, it is necessary to make commitments in relation to the obligations that you are willing to sign up to. What we proposed in the proposal that the Government put forward in the summer was to do just that, but to ensure that Parliament had a lock on those votes—but of course, there would be a consequence, and we were honest that there would be a consequence if Parliament chose not to accept those rules. That is being open with people about the consequences of their decisions.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The Prime Minister has not yet confirmed when the meaningful vote will be held. My understanding from the House of Commons Library is that now that the Government have made a statement, as she has done, that the political agreement on the withdrawal agreement and future framework has been reached, the requirement on the Government to make a statement to the House by 21 January on no deal has been superseded because of her statement today. In its view, in practice, the latest date we could have a meaningful vote is 28 March. Is this what she intends? Can I get an assurance that the delay she is talking about is a matter of days, not weeks and months?

The Prime Minister: I do not believe that the scenario my right hon. Friend sets out is the correct one. The date of 21 January has been set in legislation—the vote on that took place last week—and we are conscious of the requirement that that places on the Government. It is right, however, that we recognise the concerns expressed in the House and attempt to find a way through them and to resolve them.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Could the Prime Minister confirm reports that more than £100,000 has been shelled out by the Government on Facebook ads in the last week promoting a deal that even she is not now happy with? Is this not now an even bigger farce, as, with uncertainty around UK business access to EU trade arrangements and many other issues, she seeks to sideline Parliament once again and make social media companies richer, while the country pays the price?

The Prime Minister: No. We have recognised that a specific aspect of the deal is raising concerns here in this House, and we will seek reassurances on that specific aspect of the deal, but I continue to believe that overall this deal is the right deal for the United Kingdom.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): The Prime Minister has been consistent since she assumed the responsibility in stating that a bad deal would be worse than no deal, and we have had the time since June 2016 to prepare for leaving on WTO terms, yet Ministers consistently refer to the eventuality of our leaving without her deal as chaos. Are our preparations really so woeful?

The Prime Minister: We have been making those preparations, we continue to make them, and, as I indicated earlier, we have been stepping them up, but on the impact of no deal, it is not just a question of what preparations we make in the UK; what happens at the border also depends on others, and we cannot determine what action others will take. There will be consequences if we leave with no deal, particularly if we leave with a sense of ill will between us and the European Union and without having made any decisions to mitigate the impact of no deal. It is not just about what we do here; it is about what others do.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): If the only thing the Prime Minister has heard is that a few tweaks to the backstop arrangement will do the trick, is it not obvious that once again she is not listening hard enough?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, I recognise that the issue raised about the backstop is a genuine concern for many Members across the House. That is why I believe it is right that we address it.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): On Friday, the Treasury confirmed to me that the House has approved £4.2 billion of planning for no withdrawal agreement and, in terms, that stability in a no-deal scenario partly depends on the EU taking a similar non-disruptive approach to planning. With the economic prosperity of one of its members—the Republic of Ireland—very closely engaged, and with £39 billion at stake, as well as the interests of the EU businesses that sell twice as much to us as we sell to them, why on earth would it not be planning with us a non-disruptive move to the certainty of WTO terms and the certainty of our having control over our economy and the ability to make future trade arrangements?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend asks “Why on earth would it not?” The fact is that the European Union has been making some of its own preparations for no deal. It has sent out certain notices in relation to certain matters. However, it has not been engaging with us on the aspect of determining, or mitigating, the impact of no deal on both sides of the border.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I ask this on behalf of the many Livingston constituents who have been in touch with me, and, I am sure, many people across the United Kingdom. What the heck is going on? This is a complete and utter clusterb**t. Why is the Prime Minister more concerned with her own self-preservation, and with narrow party unity, than with the lives and livelihoods of my constituents? How dare she postpone this vote, just because she was going to lose? Downing Street and her team have spent the last few days saying that the vote was happening. How can anyone in the House, or indeed anyone in the countries of the United Kingdom, trust a single word that she or her Government speak ever again?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the hon. Lady what is going on. What is going on is that the Government are working to ensure that we can get over the line through this Parliament a deal that is good for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): May I return to what my right hon. Friend said at the beginning of her statement? The House passed a very detailed Business
of the House motion, which even specified how many hours of debate there would be, the days on which it would take place, and when the vote would be. Ministers were sent out all over the country in relation to that debate. More than 100 MPs have already spoken, and 140 wanted to speak today. It may well be that the Prime Minister is right and the House would like to put off the vote, but it needs to be the House that decides that. I do not think that the Prime Minister has so far answered this question: will the procedure to be used be a motion to adjourn the debate, in which case the House would have a vote, or will one anonymous Whip just say “Tomorrow”?

The Prime Minister: I believe that it is important for the Government to be listening to the comments that have been made to us in relation to this specific issue, and to be responding to those comments. If we want to ensure that we get a deal over the line that is good for the British people, I believe that that is absolutely the responsible approach for the Government to take.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s negotiating strategy seems to be “Fail again. Fail better.” It is not going to revive her zombie Brexit deal. Whenever she decides to bring it back to the House—on Christmas eve, Christmas day or Boxing day—it will be voted down. She talks of the will of the people, but the will of the people cannot be undermined by a vote of the people. Is that not what she must now do?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady has heard my response to the question of a further vote—a second referendum or a people’s vote on this issue. May I gently remind Opposition Members that every one of them stood on a manifesto commitment to deliver on the referendum?

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): The problem with the deal goes far beyond the backstop. May I ask my right hon. Friend what she intends to do about the fact that the Government’s own analysis shows that every region of the country will be left poorer, and that we will end up with less say over the rules governing huge swathes of our economy than we have at the moment?

The Prime Minister: Actually, the Government’s economic analysis shows that in delivering on the referendum, this deal does not make us poorer than we are today. What it does—[Interruption.] Read it. What the economic analysis shows is that if we want to honour the referendum, the best deal for doing that and delivering for jobs and the economy is this deal.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I not only respect the result of the referendum, I accept it. The Prime Minister said in her statement that she wants “a country that truly works for everyone, a country where nowhere and nobody is left behind.” She has been in government for nearly eight years now, and in that time both the previous coalition and this Government have had a deliberate policy of moving resources from poorer, most disadvantaged areas to some of the wealthiest areas. That is continuing today in public funding for public health in County Durham, which will be the worst-hit area anywhere in the country, while leafier parts of Surrey gain. People do not want warm words, Prime Minister; what they want is action, and action, irrespective of what happened with Brexit, is in her hands now.

The Prime Minister: We have been putting more money into our health service: we are going to give the health service the biggest cash boost in its history and a long-term plan that ensures the sustainability of the health service. In the eight years that I have been in government, under both the coalition and this Conservative Government, we have seen 3.3 million jobs being created across our country; that is good for the right hon. Gentleman’s constituents and good for constituents elsewhere.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend said in her statement that alternative arrangements making use of technology could be put in place that would render the backstop unnecessary. Will she therefore incorporate those arrangements and go back to the EU and ask for a free trade agreement along the lines that Michel Barnier proposed and said was the only way to ensure her red lines were not breached, and which would deliver on what the British people voted for?

The Prime Minister: The alternative arrangements are specifically referenced in the withdrawal agreement, and of course what we are looking for, and have set out in the political declaration and the proposals the Government have put forward, is indeed a wide-ranging free trade area; it is just a better one than the EU was proposing to us.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I spoke in good faith on Thursday—one of the 164 Members of Parliament who did. I cannot understand why the Prime Minister did not hear before that debate started the concerns that Members had about the backstop and other issues, so which part of the shambles we are in today does she most regret, and when will I be able to vote against her deal, as most of my constituents are asking me to do?

The Prime Minister: We will indeed, of course, be bringing the matter back when we have sought the reassurances from the EU, but I also say to the hon. Lady that it was right that we listened. In negotiating, we listened to concerns raised by Members of this House; that is why we negotiated a number of changes to the withdrawal agreement, before it was agreed, that recognised the temporary nature of the backstop. Those have proved not to satisfy Members of this House, and it is on that basis that I will seek further assurances.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Prime Minister’s grit and determination to get the best deal available is truly remarkable. Does she agree that in the event that the EU fails to give anything meaningful in relation to the backstop or a hard border that we all agree is not necessary and will not happen, it will not have demonstrated a scintilla of the good faith referenced in the political declaration?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an interesting point about good faith. I believe it is important that both sides move together at this point with that good
faith and do negotiate, and that the EU recognises the need for further reassurance on this matter and responds to that positively.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister told the House this afternoon that this is “the very best deal that is actually negotiable with the EU”, yet she now tells us she plans to go back to Brussels to plead with the EU to help her and get her out of this hole. This is not a Government in control; surely we should put this issue back to the people to ask if they really want to continue with this perilous journey that will make the UK poorer.

The Prime Minister: We have a deal agreed with the EU. There is one aspect of it on which people require further reassurance, and it is on that basis that we are going back.

Mr Shailesh Vara (North West Cambridgeshire) (Con): The United Kingdom is at the forefront of advocating democracy on the international stage. Indeed, colleagues on both sides of the House have regularly spoken in Parliament of the need for democracy in other countries, and Members on both sides regularly instruct MPs and legislators from other countries at seminars held by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Inter-Parliamentary Union on the importance of listening to the people they represent. Does my right hon. Friend agree that to have a second referendum now would ensure that the UK would lose all credibility on the international stage when speaking up for democracy?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We do speak to others about the importance of democracy, and it is important that we show an example ourselves and respect the vote that the people took.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I should like to ask the Prime Minister to do three things. First, will she rule out no deal, because she knows that it would be extremely damaging? Secondly, will she support a people’s vote, if only to save herself the embarrassment of having to do so in a couple of weeks’ time? Thirdly, will she instruct her Chief Whip to make time available for a debate on the no-confidence motion that I know the Leader of the Opposition is going to table?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman asks me to support a people’s vote, but he has heard me answer that question on a number of occasions. The Government will continue with their no-deal preparations, because that is the reasonable thing to do. On the question of time for debates in this House, there are accepted protocols in relation to that.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I respect the efforts being made by the Prime Minister, but will she tell me how many extra billions we would be paying per year if the transition period were to be extended by two years? Will she give the House a real say in determining how much money goes to the EU in that extra transition period, if it happens?

The Prime Minister: First, the terms of that further extension of the transition period/implementation period, were it to be the way forward, would have to be negotiated. There would be an expectation on the part of the EU for a sum of money, and we would consider it necessary for that to be fair and proportionate. Of course, this is one of the differences between the backstop as it appears in the withdrawal agreement and the extension of the transition period, in that, in the backstop, no financial obligation is required from the United Kingdom.

Chuka Umunna (Stratham) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that a people’s vote would not reflect the will of the people and that it would be divisive, but we do not know what the will of the people is in 2018 and we are already a divided country. Nothing would divide us more or fuel the far right more than a deteriorating economy. Is it not the case that, notwithstanding any tweak that she makes to her backstop, her withdrawal agreement will still leave us poorer, relative to the deal that we have now?

The Prime Minister: The vote took place in 2016 and people voted to leave the European Union. I believe that it is our duty to deliver on that.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am one of the hundreds of Members who was hoping to participate in the debate this evening and tomorrow, and I hope that the Government have listened closely to your guidance, Mr Speaker, and that they will allow Members the opportunity to explain their views. I would like the opportunity to explain to the people of Moray why I came to the conclusion that I could not support the Prime Minister on her deal. But may I ask the Prime Minister a question that has so far been evaded across the House? Not only the Members in this Chamber but our constituents deserve to know when the vote will finally be taken. When will it be?

The Prime Minister: We are going to discuss with the European Union, the other party to this negotiation, the requirements that we are putting forward. Until those discussions have properly started, it is not possible to say the length of time that will be necessary for them. Reference has already been made to 21 January, which is within the legislation that this House has passed. I want to work as quickly and as urgently as possible—

Interjection: My hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross) says, “When?” As I have just said, we need to enter those discussions with the European Union, and until we have done that, it is not possible to give a date.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): An Opposition Member said only last week that the Government always say no before they say yes, so I am holding my breath about the people’s vote.

In 2016, 17.4 million people voted to leave the EU. The Prime Minister says that her deal delivers Brexit and the will of the people, but the hon. Members in her own party who also want to leave the European Union—such as the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), and the hon. Members for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and for Wycombe (Mr Baker)—do not believe that her deal delivers on
Brexit and on the will of the people. How many of the 17.4 million people who voted in 2016 voted for her deal?

The Prime Minister: The message that I get from people up and down the country, regardless of whether they voted leave or remain, is very simple: deliver on the vote, get on with it and let us move on.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I speak as a remainer, which is probably a dangerous thing to do in this corner of the Back Benches. I respect the result of the referendum. However, I would like to ask my right hon. Friend what the point has been of all the pain and uncertainty of the last two years if, in the final analysis, the arbitration panel remains under the dominion of the European Court of Justice.

The Prime Minister: This is, I believe, a misunderstanding of the situation. The arbitration panel does not remain under the dominion of the European Court of Justice; the arbitration panel will make its own decisions. But if a dispute involves the interpretation of European Union law, there is only one body that can interpret European Union law, and that is the European Court of Justice. The arbitration panel will be able to ask the ECJ for its opinion on that particular point, and the arbitration panel will then determine the dispute. The European Court of Justice will not be the arbiter of that dispute.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Shortly after the Prime Minister announced that there would be no vote on this issue, Michel Barnier and the Taoiseach of the Irish Republic slapped down the idea that there would be any renegotiation of this deal. The Prime Minister may be prepared to be humiliated by arrogant EU officials and Irish politicians, but does she not realise that, every time she comes back here with her tail between her legs, she humiliates the British people? When will she stand up to the EU? If she is not prepared to stand up to the EU, let her have a vote of this House to tell them what we think of their rotten deal.

The Prime Minister: We have stood up to the European Union. Perhaps a good example of our doing so was our absolute refusal, as a Government, to accept a customs border down the Irish sea, separating the United Kingdom into two customs territories. In February, that was what the European Union wanted, and they stuck to that until we argued them out of it in October. We have stood up to the European Union. We have got a good deal for the UK.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is the duty and responsibility of every single Member in this House to take our country out of the EU. My right hon. Friend’s deal does not do that, and many MPs on both sides of the House are intentionally thwarting that intention. May I ask her to go back to the EU, offer a free trade agreement and, if that is not acceptable, fall back on WTO terms and then deal with the EU outside the EU, where I am positive that a deal will be struck and this poison and division will be gone?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that every Member of this House has a duty to deliver on the result of the referendum and take the United Kingdom out of the European Union. The Government have been working to ensure that on the table, as part of this deal, there is a free trade agreement with the European Union—but a better one than the basic free trade agreement that was proposed by the EU in the early stages of the negotiation.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in her statement, and I agree with her, that the majority of people in this House do not want no deal. She also knows that the ERG is a small minority in this House. Rather than writing a side letter, which will not satisfy the ERG, why does she not do what my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition said and agree the next set of negotiating objectives across the House?

The Prime Minister: As I have explained to Members previously, this question of the backstop, and the concern about the backstop, is one that is not just held by a small number of Members of this House; it is held by a wide range of Members on both the Opposition Benches and the Government Benches. In that circumstance, I believe we are taking exactly the right action.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Could my right hon. Friend please not bring this back to the House before Christmas? That would give Members in an entrenched position the chance to reflect over the recess.

The Prime Minister: I hear what my hon. Friend says. As I said earlier, the timing of this is rather better determined by the nature of the discussions we have with the European Union.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): The Prime Minister started this process by going to the Supreme Court to stop the House of Commons having a say in starting the Brexit process. We are only having a vote tomorrow—or were only having a vote tomorrow, because she was defeated last year on the amendment to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill. Is it not true that she has barefaced cheek to come before the House and lecture us about our duty to this House and our Parliament? Is it not true that no Prime Minister is better than a bad Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: What I have pointed out today to Members of this House is the duty that each and every one of us has, having stood, as the hon. Gentleman did, on a manifesto to deliver on the result of the referendum, to do exactly that.

Lee Rowley (North East Derbyshire) (Con): Can the Prime Minister give me one example of how a political reassurance, in law, can ever supersede the binding words of an international treaty?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is making an assumption about what will come back from the European Union. It is the task of the Government, obviously, to look to negotiate something that will be sufficient to give confidence to Members of this House in relation to the backstop not being able to be indefinite.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I have listened very closely to the Prime Minister’s responses so far this afternoon. Does she truly believe
that the people who voted to leave two and a half years ago did so in order to make our country poorer? Did they want Brexit at any cost? If she is so sure that the majority of our country want this actual deal, rather than the false promises they were mis-sold, why does she not do the most democratic thing and take her deal back to the country, giving it the final say?

The Prime Minister: I think people voted to ensure that we bring an end to free movement, which the deal does; that we bring an end to sending vast annual sums to the European Union, which the deal does; and that we bring an end to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, which the deal does.

James Cleverly (BrainTREE) (Con): My hon. Friends and Members across the House have been expressing anecdotal and unscientific assessments of their voters’ change of mind about the referendum result. In that spirit, I would like to highlight the conversations I have had both with friends and constituents who voted remain but are now determined that we leave the European Union in good order. Will the Prime Minister give me an assurance that she will go back to the EU, bang on the table, if that is what it takes, and get a deal that will have the support of this House and get us out of the European Union on 29 March 2019?

The Prime Minister: I can assure my hon. Friend that that is exactly what we intend to do. He is absolutely right, and I see many messages coming to me from people who voted remain but now say, “Actually, we accept the result of the vote. Let’s get on with it and let’s leave the European Union.”

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The European Commission has made it absolutely clear that it is not going to reopen the SPS-page withdrawal agreement. If the Prime Minister was able to get an aspirational addendum to the political declaration—a piece of paper that she could wave when she came back—would that mean we would definitely have a vote on Monday or Tuesday next week?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, the timing of the vote will be determined by the extent and nature of the discussions with the European Union.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Changing tack a little, will my right hon. Friend assure me that the proposed new deep and special relationship on defence, security and intelligence matters mentioned in the draft withdrawal agreement will not affect our special dealings with other “Five Eyes” nations, especially the United States?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that absolute assurance.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Surely the Prime Minister realises that this House must be given a reasonable period in which to reflect on the vote and take its decision. The new year is too late—7 January is just 14 days before the all-important deadline. Surely the vote must come before this House before the end of next week.

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, we will obviously be working hard in relation to the negotiations. I am sure hon. Members of this House, as a number have indicated, would want to make sure that we are putting our case in the most forceful way.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): On Friday I visited a haulage business in my constituency, and the owner told me how worried he is about the possibility of no deal and how it will affect his business. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when we come to vote on the withdrawal agreement, we must remember the importance not only of honouring the referendum result but of the jobs and livelihoods that depend on trade with the European Union?

The Prime Minister: It is very important both that we deliver on the result of the referendum and that we recognise the need to do that in a way that enables us to leave in a smooth and orderly way and that does, indeed, protect those many jobs that depend on the trading relationship with the European Union.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I have been reflecting on the referendum that I took part in as an 18-year-old first-time voter in 1979, in which Scotland voted on returning its Parliament. If the EU referendum had been subject to the same rules, we would not be leaving now. However, does the Prime Minister not accept that the difficulty in getting an acceptable trade deal and in resolving the problem of the Irish border is not the fault of the Irish, north or south, and is not the fault of Europe? It is the fault of the red lines that she unilaterally and unnecessarily set right at the start. If the Prime Minister will not accept that it is time for the red lines to go, surely it is time for the Prime Minister to go.

The Prime Minister: What this Government have been negotiating, and what is present in the deal, is a good future relationship in trading terms in relation to the border and, in relation to not being a member of the customs union and not being a member of the single market, delivering on the vote of the referendum. I believe that is what we should be doing for the people of this country.

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I agree with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister when she says no deal would be bad for the UK, but it would also be bad for the European Union. With that in mind, would she agree that the European Union, as it and its diplomats watch this debate, needs to decide whether it wants a deal or not, because without changes to the backstop, a deal will not pass this House?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has made an important point. I believe, from all my discussions with European Union leaders, that they do indeed want a deal, but he is absolutely right: it is about recognising the concerns that remain in relation to the backstop to ensure there is a deal that this House will accept.
David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): I remind the Prime Minister that assurances will not deliver the people of Northern Ireland on this deal—no assurances will. Will she go further and admit that to get the deal as far as she has got it, Northern Ireland had to be made the sacrificial lamb to placate the Irish Republic and the EU?

The Prime Minister: No, that is absolutely not the case. Throughout these negotiations, this United Kingdom Government have been very aware of the responsibility we have to the people of Northern Ireland. It is that responsibility that leads us to want to ensure that in the circumstances set out in the withdrawal agreement it will be possible to assure people in Northern Ireland that there is no hard border between them and Ireland.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): As somebody who represents a heavy leave-voting northern constituency and who actually lives in their constituency in the north, let me say that my voters—leave voters—are sick to the back teeth of being told by remainers, people who lost the referendum, what it was they voted for. We have been told that we are racists, that we are a bit stupid and that we are a bit too northern, and now we are being told that we did not know what we voted for. My constituents are none of those things, and what they can see going on in this place is a stitch-up by people who said they accepted the result of the referendum but who are using every trick in the book to deny the people what they voted for.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend speaks with passion on behalf of his constituents and he is right to do so. It is frankly unacceptable for Members in this House to try to suggest to people that they simply did not understand what they were voting for. The people of this country understood what they were voting for; they knew what they wanted in terms of leaving the European Union, and we should listen to that and deliver on it.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Given that the Prime Minister’s red lines originally caused the problem in Northern Ireland, can she give some assurances that she will turn those lines pink to ensure that we have free and frictionless trade?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that this is a theme that has been raised by a number of Members on the Opposition Benches, but it is not the case. What we have said on Northern Ireland is that we accept the European Union’s approach of carving Northern Ireland out as a separate customs territory from the rest of the United Kingdom.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The Prime Minister has been on her feet taking questions for 11 hours with regard to this deal. It may not have escaped her attention, and it will not have escaped my constituents’ attention, that Members across the House are saying, on the one hand, that they speak for the people with a second referendum and, on the other hand, that they speak for the people when they want a no-deal. Obviously, that cannot be correct. Does she agree that when it comes to leadership we need the art of compromise? She has shown that and the European Union has shown that. If Parliament wishes to take control, we need to show compromise as well, otherwise we will be responsible for the damage that ensues to our constituents.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. In any negotiation, it is necessary to compromise; it is necessary to know what your vital interests are and to stick to them, but also to be willing to compromise in order to achieve those vital interests. It is for all of us to recognise the damage that can be done to our constituents if this House does not deliver on the referendum and do so in a way that protects people’s jobs and livelihoods.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Since the Prime Minister has been on her feet this afternoon, the pound has fallen to its lowest level since early 2017. The FTSE 250 has fallen to its lowest level for two years, as a direct consequence of the uncertainty caused by this failed brinkmanship. Is it not grossly irresponsible of the Prime Minister to tell the country that we do not know when we will have a vote on this and that this uncertainty may continue indefinitely?

The Prime Minister: Of course, people look at this House and hear people talking about the possibility of a second referendum or of a general election, all of which would increase uncertainty, increase division and increase the problems for this country.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): The parts in an average Land Rover cross the continent 37 times. My 9,000 car workers need an orderly withdrawal from the EU. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the withdrawal agreement is rejected, we may get no deal, a “permanent Norway”, not a temporary one, or—a stain on the soul of this House—a second referendum?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend puts it very well. Members of this House need to consider the importance not only of delivering on the referendum but of doing it in a way that, as he says, protects people’s jobs and their and their children’s futures.

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (Con): The Prime Minister is right to say that the House needs to honour the result of the 2016 referendum, and that need was why many of us in this House voted to embark on the article 50 process. The Prime Minister then set her red lines in January 2017, after which we went into a general election. The direct consequence of that general election was the loss of our Conservative majority and the gridlock that we see in Parliament today. If there is no majority in this House for any option and the Prime Minister, having gone back to renegotiate, has not got anything that the House can accept, we should not be boxed in again by our own red lines. Parliament is not frustrating the will of the people; the general election produced an outcome that cannot lead to a clear decision, so we should not be afraid to give the choice back to the people.

The Prime Minister: I hear the argument that that my hon. Friend is making, but I have answered the question about the people’s vote on several occasions. He talks
about the views of people across the House; when the
time comes it will be for people across the House to
recognise the importance of delivering on the vote that
took place in 2016.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Prime Minister
talks about trust, faith in politics and the importance of
honouring the 2016 vote, but what does she think it will
do to trust in politics when those voters realise that the
deal she has negotiated bears so little resemblance to
what they voted for? What will it do when people realise
that we will be subjected to EU rules but with no say
over them? What will it do when people realise that
initially we cannot trade with the rest of the world, and
that even when we can it will not substitute for the trade
that she has sacrificed around the negotiating table?
Worst of all, what will it do to trust in politics when
people are feeling the pain and are subjected to what the
Prime Minister has negotiated, but were given no say
over it whatsoever? If she believes that her deal is in the
national interest and commands public support, why
will she not ask the people?

The Prime Minister: People voted to end the jurisdiction
of the European Court, to end free movement and to
end sending vast sums to the European Union every
year, and that is what this deal delivers.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I respect the
Prime Minister’ efforts to try to get the reassurances on
the backstop to deliver on the referendum, and let us
remember that delivering on it was a manifesto commitment
for Conservative and Labour Members. Does she agree
that those Members who hope that this situation leads
to no deal should realise that the House will not support
that outcome and that any other deal will not honour
the referendum in a meaningful way? Snatching
parliamentary defeat out of the jaws of referendum
victory would be bad for trust, but not impossible if
even Members fail to get behind the Government’s
proposals.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has put the facts
clearly to the House. In my statement I spoke of the
responsibility that the House has to deliver on the
referendum, to do that in a way that protects people’s
jobs and futures, and to recognise the importance of the
vote that people will take and its impact on people’s
trust in our politics.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): This
morning, a prominent Nottingham business warned me
that a no-deal Brexit could put it out of business. This
afternoon, the Prime Minister raised the threat of an
accidental no deal. It is crystal clear that her deal
cannot command a majority in this House, whenever
we vote on it. Is not her time-wasting delay simply
reckless?

The Prime Minister: No, and hon. Members of this
House who do not wish to have no deal need to recognise
that the only way not to have no deal is to have a deal
and to agree a deal. There is no agreement on any
alternative deal in this House.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): There is
one part of the agreement that it is incontestable must
be legally binding sooner rather than later: the issue of
citizens’ rights. Will the Prime Minister reassure the House
that if the ugly spectre of no deal arises when she
speaks to EU leaders, she will reinforce her efforts to
ensure that a legally binding agreement on citizens’
rights can be brought before the House as soon as
possible?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his
question. He has consistently championed the rights of
EU citizens living in the UK throughout this process. I
assure him that we have been stepping up to the plate in
relation to citizens’ rights and a no-deal scenario. My
right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the
European Union has reminded me that a notification
was issued last week on that matter, but we should also
remember that there are 1 million UK citizens living in
EU27 member states, and that we should encourage
those member states to extend the same generosity to
them.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Will the Prime
Minister tell the House straight whether this is true:
when she comes back with her assurances, it will still be
the case that not a single word in the 585 page withdrawal
agreement will have been changed. Is that correct?

The Prime Minister: I have answered that question
previously. We are going into negotiations with the
European Union. We have negotiated a deal with the
European Union. We are looking at ways in which it
will be possible to provide the necessary reassurance for
Members of this House, and we will explore the options.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): My
constituency voted more heavily to leave the European
Union than any other. When I talk to constituents, the
feeling that I get is that more people now would vote to
leave than when they first had the vote in 2016. For the
sake of democracy, I would be one of them now as well.
Does the Prime Minister agree that it should fill our
constituents with horror when Members of Parliament
who stood on manifestos to deliver Brexit now talk of a
second referendum?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon.
Friend. Indeed, I receive messages from across the
country from people who voted to remain who say,
exactly as he has, that they would now vote to leave
because they believe in the importance of recognising
and honouring the result of the referendum.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): The
Prime Minister today asks whether this House
wants to deliver Brexit. Well, I am more interested in
whether my constituents do. Since she brought this deal
to the House, 85% of the letters that I have received are
in favour of a people’s vote with the option to remain.
She also says that we need to be honest about the risks. I
can tell her that my constituents know very well those
risks. They are dismayed at the mess here, and they now
consider it the least worst option. By denying the will of
the people of Oxford West and Abingdon and of others
across this country, is she suggesting that they do not
know what they are asking for?
The Prime Minister: No, what I am saying to the hon. Lady—many Members of this House from across the country will also be receiving such responses—is that people are making the point that they voted in the referendum and that they expect Parliament to deliver on the result of the referendum rather than having a second vote.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): In the Prime Minister’s statement earlier, in relation to the backstop, she made it clear that she had listened to the views of the House. That is a mark of true leadership, and she has done exactly the right thing. However, she will also acknowledge that, following the Attorney General’s statement last week, many Members of the House, on both sides of the Chamber, have concerns about the legally binding nature of the backstop and the fact that we require European Union consent to get out of it. Does she therefore agree that any changes to the arrangements that are designed to reassure the House must be legally enforceable?

The Prime Minister: I am well aware of the concerns of the House about the legal enforceability of this issue. What people have been saying is that they want to ensure that the backstop can be brought to an end, and there are various ways in which we can do that. What we will be discussing with the European Union is the whole question of how we can do that in a way that gives sufficient reassurance and confidence to Members of this House that they will not be faced with a situation where they have one aspect of this, which is under one determination, and another aspect, which is less secure. It is about giving that confidence to Members of this House that we will be negotiating.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I believe that the Prime Minister, who, incidentally, just last year promised us a strong and stable Administration, attended a lunch today where she said that her deal was the best available. What does she know now that she did not know then?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear that we are looking at one aspect of the deal, and that we had negotiated ways of addressing it within the withdrawal agreement. What has been proved is that the way that we negotiated it in that withdrawal agreement has not been sufficient to give confidence to Members of this House. The European Union has been clear that the backstop is only temporary, but people want further confidence that it will be only temporary and that it can be brought to an end. That is what we will be negotiating and discussing with the European Union.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the general tenet of the Prime Minister’s remarks today. When she meets European leaders, will she be making it clear that this is not about anyone wanting to return to the borders of the past in Ireland, but that it is about ensuring that we will have the sovereign ability to choose our own trading destiny and that we will not be subject to potential vetoes on extraneous issues that are nothing to do with keeping a border open in Ireland?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend puts it very well. It is important that we remind the European Union that we are committed to no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland, but that we are also committed to having an independent trade policy, as the EU has reflected and respected in the political declaration. It is important that our policies to deliver on no hard border enable us to operate that independent trade policy.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The art of diplomacy is known as allowing someone else to have your way. Given that failure on the Government’s part, when a Government cannot get through their central piece of legislation, should they not stand aside? If they do not, should not the Leader of the Opposition table a no-confidence motion? I suspect that if the Prime Minister were sitting where the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) is sitting, she would do exactly the same.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about legislation. The meaningful vote is not in itself legislation. The legislation follows with the withdrawal agreement Bill that we will put before the House. [Interruption.] He says he did not mention it, but he did use the term “legislation” for what the Government are doing. We are ensuring that we have listened to Members of this House, and we are holding further discussions with the European Union to deliver on the views on this House.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I would like to speak up for something that seems to be going out of fashion—that is, compromise and pragmatism to bring the country back together. Does the Prime Minister agree that Opposition Members need to respect the manifesto that they stood on, which was to deliver the result of the referendum, stop playing party politics with their own constituents and back the deal, because they say they do not favour a no deal—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There is a lot of noise. The hon. Lady must be heard.

Rachel Maclean: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I merely asked the Prime Minister whether she agrees that the Opposition need to support her deal to deliver what they promised to their constituents.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The official Opposition, as the Conservative party did, stood on a manifesto to deliver on the referendum, and they should do exactly that.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Given that the Prime Minister and her Government have led these negotiations for 29 months, what are the exact terms that the Prime Minister wants to negotiate with the EU this week?

The Prime Minister: I think I have answered this question on several occasions. I want to negotiate in relation to the backstop—ensuring that it is not permanent or indefinite and can only be temporary.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): All Members of this House are here as the result of a democratic vote. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is at best mystifying that many such Members refuse to honour or respect the democratic outcome of the referendum—and, in some cases, two referendums?
The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree. Sadly, there are Members of this House who appear not to want to deliver on the result of the referendum in 2016 and there are also Members of this House who seem not to want to accept the result of the referendum that took place in Scotland in 2014.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The Government’s mishandling of the negotiations has thrust the country into chaos, with growing uncertainty and deep concern in our automotive sector, including the Jaguar plant in my constituency. We are but three months away from the cliff. Whatever the ultimate way forward agreed by this House is in the next stages, will the Prime Minister today rule out any question of a no-deal Brexit? The jobs of tens of thousands of workers depend on it.

The Prime Minister: I have been clear that I believe that the best route forward for the UK is to leave with a good deal with the European Union. That is what we have negotiated, and that is a deal that recognises the importance of the trading relationship to many jobs across this country, including in the automotive industry. But if this House desires not to have no deal, then this House needs to accept a deal, and the best deal on the table is the one that the Government have negotiated.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Earlier on, the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) spoke about his concerns for the economy and what has happened to the pound today. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is as nothing compared with what would happen to our economy under the economically illiterate, destructive and chaotic policies of a Labour Government propped up by the SNP?

The Prime Minister: Yes, my hon. Friend is absolutely right. The flight of capital and the run on the pound is the one that the Government have negotiated, and that is a deal that recognises the prosperity not only of Northern Ireland but the whole United Kingdom. Having no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland is an important part of maintaining that process into the future.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Are not the public entitled to a grown-up acknowledgement across this House that the issue of the backstop affects both policies? Whether it is the Prime Minister’s proposal or, indeed, the Opposition proposal to stay in the customs union or outside the single market, both require a backstop. Does she agree?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Any of the alternative arrangements that are being put up by contrast to the Government’s deal also require a backstop. The backstop is there in the circumstances where the negotiations fail to achieve the future relationship in time at the end of the transition period, and that could happen in the negotiation of any of the agreements.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): This ongoing farce would be funny if it was not so serious for the jobs and prosperity of my constituents. The Prime Minister rightly says that she wants to be honest with the public, so can she be honest: is her deal non-negotiable?

The Prime Minister: We have negotiated the deal with the European Union that covers many aspects over and above the issue of the backstop. The one that Members of this House have raised concerns about is the particular aspect of the backstop in relation to whether or not it can be indefinite or is only temporary. It is that specific point on which we are seeking these reassurances.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Like many other colleagues, I was hoping to speak in the debate and outline my reasons why I would be opposing this deal and voting against it. Can the Prime Minister clarify this specific point for me? She has talked about manifesto commitments. May I refer her to page 36 of the Conservative party manifesto, which says:

“As we leave the European Union, we will no longer be members of the single market or customs union”?

How does that reconcile with the deal that we have and the Attorney General’s advice at paragraph 7 on the customs union and the single market?

The Prime Minister: It is indeed reconciled with the fact that the future relationship we will have with the European Union will ensure that we are not in the single market and not in the customs union. Indeed, in the withdrawal agreement, in relation to the backstop in Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland will not be in the single market. The point about the backstop is that it is only intended to be temporary. Coming out of the single market, coming out of the customs union and coming out of all the other aspects of the European Union membership that people voted against and wanted to see us come out of is delivered in the future relationship we have with the European Union.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I wonder whether the Prime Minister could clarify two points. First, in anticipation of speaking in this afternoon’s
debate, like many other Members, including those on the Government Benches, I gauged my constituents’ opinion. Implicit in that, as in the Prime Minister’s statement that she has listened to the House and will review the backstop, is an acknowledgment that people can change their mind. That being the case, why is she not prepared to let the country say whether it has changed its mind? Secondly, could she clarify the point raised by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) about the mechanism she will use for this afternoon’s debate?

The Prime Minister: There will be a business statement after this statement. In relation to the hon. Lady’s first question about going back to the country in a second referendum, I refer her to the answer I gave to the same question earlier.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): In all my discussions with businesses and farmers in my constituency, they have said that they desperately want a deal, so I support my right hon. Friend’s instincts. Given that we are told that the technology exists in the world to deliver a robust, non-hard, policy-compliant border within the transition period, does she believe that the backstop is potentially being overblown as anything other than the insurance policy that all parties require to safeguard the precious peace of which so many Members have spoken?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the withdrawal agreement now references the possibility of those alternative arrangements that can deliver on no hard border, which is so important for the peace he references, and could mean that the backstop genuinely does not need to be used. There has been a lot of focus on the backstop, but the possibility of extending the transition period and the existence of alternative arrangements both make it even less likely that the backstop would ever come into force.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The tactic employed by the Prime Minister of trying to foment division between this House and the country outside is to be deeply regretted and will only add to the problems that she described in her statement. Is the deal that is currently on the table now dead, since she is trying to renegotiate something that was previously negotiable?

The Prime Minister: First, we are not trying to foment division between this House and the people. [Hon. Members: “Yes you are!” No. Every Member of this House has a responsibility to understand the duty to deliver on the vote of the referendum. A number of Members are indicating that they would prefer to follow a different route than delivering on the referendum vote. I believe that we have a duty to deliver on the referendum vote. As I have explained, I believe the deal that has been negotiated is the right deal for the UK. There is a link in the backstop on which we will be going back to the European Union.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I said during one of the Prime Minister’s previous statements that Northern Ireland “will not be your sacrifice.”—[Official Report, 15 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 474.]

She has stated that there must be compromise, but the state of Northern Ireland is an absolute, and the tinkering that has taken place is not acceptable. Regrettably, none of her words today have reassured the House. The gap of mistrust between her and the Democratic Unionist party and myself has grown into a chasm; it is clear that it has never been so wide. I support the majority of the UK in asking her to do what was asked—to leave the EU as we entered it, with no backstop, on our own merits, confident of our ability as a global power and no man’s slave.

The Prime Minister: We do indeed want to deliver on leaving the European Union, but in doing that, I want to ensure that there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. I believe that that is important, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman does, for his constituents and for the future of Northern Ireland. That is one of the commitments we have given, and it is one that I intend to deliver on.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Over the weekend, hundreds of constituents have got in touch with me asking me to vote down this terrible, woeful deal that the Prime Minister has come back with. There is no—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the Government Minister standing at the Bar: be quiet. I have not the slightest interest in hearing you yelling in the background. Sit down, be quiet and listen, and if you are not able or inclined to do that—[Interruption. / Order. Do not look at me and tell me what’s what or imply that you can. Be quiet and do not be discourteous to the Member on her feet. If you cannot be quiet, Mr Stuart, you are most welcome to leave the Chamber, and we are perfectly capable of coping without you.

Alison Thewliss: There is no confidence in this Prime Minister’s deal. She does not have the confidence of her Back Benchers, my constituents or the majority of Members of this House. She cannot even tell us the date when the vote will return to the House. Is it not the case that this Prime Minister has bottled it and should go?

The Prime Minister: If I was bottling it, I would not have come to the Chamber and been on my feet for nearly two and a half hours answering questions.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Taoiseach Leo Varadkar is quoted today as saying: “We have already offered a lot of concessions...We ended up with the backstop because of all the red lines the UK laid down.”. EU leaders know that we have the backstop designed by the Prime Minister. Exactly what is she going to renegotiate?

The Prime Minister: This is not a backstop designed by the United Kingdom. The one aspect of this backstop that was required by the United Kingdom was that the customs territory was UK-wide and that we did not see a Northern Ireland customs territory, which was what the EU wanted. We stood up against it, and we delivered.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Prime Minister and many on her Benches have demonstrated an astounding ignorance of the history of these isles. Attempting to bully Ireland into perceived
compliance by threatening food supplies is utterly abhorrent. Can she assure the House that in any conversations, negotiations or interactions, Ireland will be considered an equal?

The Prime Minister: The Government have not suggested that. Ireland is currently a fellow member of the European Union. We, in the future, will not be a member of the European Union. One of the things that I have discussed with the Taoiseach is how we can ensure that our bilateral relations, which have been growing much stronger in recent years, continue to grow, in the interests of the whole of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Dragging the decision on the Prime Minister’s deal into the new year for what looks like tactical advantage is unfair on everyone, but it is particularly unfair on businesses trying to plan for their future and for EU citizens who want to know their rights. Will she at least promise to bring the vote before the Christmas recess?

The Prime Minister: One of the important elements of the deal that we have negotiated is being able to give EU citizens confidence about their rights, even should there be no deal. What is important for certainty for the future, and what will deliver all these things, is this House agreeing a deal.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I have had hundreds of constituents emailing me to express their unhappiness with the Prime Minister’s deal, and they are not troubled by the backstop; they are worried about their jobs, the economy, whether they will be able to get their hands on life-saving medicines and whether food prices will go through the roof. It is self-indulgent in the extreme for us to put off this decision day after day, while the Prime Minister tries to save her own skin. She will not be able to come back with a deal which satisfies me that my constituents will not be worse off. Can she just get on with it?

The Prime Minister: That is what I am doing. I am getting on with finding a way through—[Interruption.] I am listening to Members of this House and then getting back to negotiate on that basis. The deal has been negotiated with the European Union. If the hon. Lady wants to avoid no deal, she has to accept a deal. This is the deal that is on the table.

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It was clear after the Chequers agreement was announced that there was not a majority in Parliament for it. It has been clear since the withdrawal agreement announcement was made that there is not a majority in Parliament for it. It has been clear after three days of debate that there is not a majority in Parliament for the Prime Minister’s plan. In that time, we have wasted months. Now the Prime Minister proposes to waste further weeks. Is the Prime Minister’s new strategy to run the clock down to the very last minute to give us a false choice between her deal and the catastrophe of no deal?

The Prime Minister: Hon. Members of this House will need to face the fact that there will be a choice between a deal, no deal and no Brexit—[Interruption.] Between a deal—a deal—no deal and no Brexit. There is no majority in this House for any of the alternative arrangements that have been put forward by Members of this House.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Prime Minister told us earlier that she had been listening, but I am afraid she has been a touch selective in what she has actually heard, because it is not just about the backstop. Will she level with the country and tell people that the political declaration is not actually a deal, but a series of shared aspirations, and the negotiations are likely to drag on for years and years?

The Prime Minister: The political declaration makes it very clear that what will be negotiated will give effect to what is in the political declaration. If you like, it is instructions to the negotiators. What is also clear within the deal that has been agreed is that both sides will use their best endeavours, acting in good faith, to achieve that negotiation by the end of December 2020.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Nine times, the Prime Minister assured us that there would be no early general election, and still it happened. As recently as this morning her hapless, ever-changing band of Ministers were out on the airwaves assuring us that there would be a meaningful vote tomorrow before this latest twist—a sort of premature parliamentary ejaculation—that has put the lie to the claim that she sticks to her guns. When she will not even tell us when the vote is deferred to and as it appears the lady is for turning, how can we or anyone trust anything she says again?

The Prime Minister: I am tempted to say to the hon. Lady that, if she looks carefully, I think she will see that I am not capable of a parliamentary ejaculation. [Laughter.]

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Hard to follow that one, Mr Speaker.

At a quarter to four this afternoon, I received a written answer that stated: “The Northern Ireland Protocol guarantees that even in the event that the UK’s future relationship with the EU is not in place by the end of the implementation period, there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland and no splitting of the UK’s customs territory. In so doing, the agreement preserves the economic and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom, upholds the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement, and ensures people and businesses that rely on an open border between Northern Ireland and Ireland can continue living their lives and operating as they do now.”

Does the Prime Minister agree?

The Prime Minister: Yes. That is what we have negotiated—to ensure there will be no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): World leaders are gathering in Katowice in Poland this week to agree action on climate change, the single biggest issue facing us in the world today. Instead, here we are embroiled in a massive act of self-harm, with us unable to move forward, the pound at its lowest point in 18 months and locked in a stalemate. Without any majority in Parliament for a deal, please put this back to the people—not for the second time, but for the first time on this deal.
The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I have given earlier. I also point out to her that if she wants the Government to be able to get on and focus on the issues that she is talking about—we have representation in Katowice, and we are still working on the issues of climate change and other things—going back for a second referendum will not help that process.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Prime Minister admits that if she put the deal to this House tomorrow, it would be rejected, in her words, by “a significant margin”, so why is she behaving like the shopkeeper in the dead parrot sketch and insisting that this dead deal is not yet deceased?

The Prime Minister: Because, as I have pointed out, there is a specific reason why people have raised concerns about the negotiation. It is about the issue of the temporary nature or otherwise of the backstop, and that is what we are going back to the European Union to discuss.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): At the beginning of this process, the Prime Minister said she would reach out right across the UK to the devolved nations, across the divide, and agree a negotiating position before going to Europe, but she did not. She has made all the decisions herself and painted herself into a corner with her red lines, and what we have in front of us is a blind Brexit. We will not be putting this behind us for years because those 26 pages are just blather—it is nothing. It is clear from the fact that the Prime Minister will not allow MPs to vote and will not allow the people to vote that she has no faith in this deal herself. Is that not closer to the case?

The Prime Minister: No, it is not, and it is not the case that MPs are not going to be allowed to vote. There will be a vote in this House—[HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] There will be a vote in this House, but we will be negotiating on the issue of the backstop.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I spent much of the weekend reassuring worried farmers, fishermen and distillery workers in my constituency that the stark choice being forced on them between the Prime Minister’s deal and a hard, no-deal Brexit was a false choice. Today, the Prime Minister has confirmed that I was right—it is a false choice. Will she now accept that this was one cruel bluff too far, and that today, in the eyes of the public, she and her hopelessly divided Government are taking self-serving political cowardice to a whole new level?

The Prime Minister: Two of the things that will be delivered by this deal are coming out of the common agricultural policy and coming out of the common fisheries policy. Those are both important, for our agricultural sector and for our fishermen, because we will be able to deliver improvements for both those sectors in the future.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Even by this Government’s standards, the events of today have been extraordinary. My constituents will be looking on today in horror at what the Prime Minister is doing. There are just 109 days to go until we are due to leave the EU and the Prime Minister does not have the confidence to put her own deal to a vote of this House. Every day this chaos continues, it damages the country. As the Prime Minister does not command a majority in this House any longer, will she step aside?

The Prime Minister: No. What we are doing is ensuring that we can have a deal. For the confidence and certainty that the hon. Lady’s constituents want, I believe that it is important that this country agrees a deal that delivers for them on their jobs and livelihoods in the future, and that is what this deal does.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): The Prime Minister said that it was disquiet about the backstop in this House that is leading her to return to the European Union, but many of the 164 speeches that we have heard so far in the debate indicate that it is not just the backstop that is of concern, and my constituents have many other concerns about the deal that is on the table. Will the Prime Minister tell us when she is going to put this intrinsically unsatisfactory deal before this House so that we can vote on it?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answer I gave earlier.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): The Prime Minister has rather given the game away with her statement today, for as long as we fail to agree a deal, the risk of an accidental no deal increases. It would be monumental folly for any Government accidentally to stumble into no deal. We have had three days of debate. Let us have the next two, and let us have a vote on her deal.

The Prime Minister: It is a responsibility of Members of this House, when they come to look at the deal that the Government put before them, to recognise what the potential alternatives are in relation to no Brexit or no deal.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): What we have witnessed today is the evaporation of any lingering vapours of credibility from this Prime Minister and a Government that she leads in name only, after the cowardly decision to postpone or stop the vote. After more than two years of pandering to Tory Back-Bench infighting and coming up with this mess, is it not time that she took responsibility? If the Leader of the Opposition has the backbone to press a no-confidence vote tomorrow, will she abstain or will she do the honourable thing beforehand and resign?

The Prime Minister: No.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Last year the Prime Minister called an election, because she understood clearly that in democracies we regularly go back to the people and have a vote. After losing three votes in Parliament last week, she seems to have gone a bit cold on democracy. She does not want a people’s vote, but now she does not even want votes in the House of Commons. When will we get to vote? What date will the Prime Minister set for a vote? I have no trust in this Prime Minister, and I do not think the country does either.

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave earlier.
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Prime Minister accept that the fundamental premise of this deal is not going to change and that no amount of sugar-coating is going to build a majority in this House for a fundamentally dead deal? Will she face up to the reality of democracy, face the House of Commons, put it to a vote and allow Parliament to decide what happens next, instead of holding us all hostage to her own misfortune?

The Prime Minister: The fundamental premise of this deal is that it delivers on the referendum, respects the decision taken by the British people and does so in a way that protects people’s jobs and livelihoods for the future. I believe that is the right premise for the deal.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I have heard absolutely nothing that justifies halting our debate, because if the red lines are not going to change, the deal is not going to be changed materially either. In the last few minutes, Donald Tusk has confirmed that the deal and the backstop cannot be renegotiated. If the Prime Minister is intent on listening to this House, will she confirm that we will have a vote on whether to halt our debate?

The Prime Minister: I have set out the position in my statement, and there will be a business statement to the House later.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is good to hear that the Prime Minister is listening. If she is indeed listening, what would she say to my constituent who voted leave, but who said that he feels he was miserably misled and misinformed by the leave campaign and has since said, like many others, that he would like the opportunity to make an informed decision through a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I have given an answer in relation to the people’s vote on a number of occasions. Some 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union. She cites her constituent; there are many other constituents who, having voted to remain, would now vote to leave the European Union, because they believe it is important for Government and Parliament to deliver on the referendum.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Prime Minister, was this the easiest deal in history?

The Prime Minister: I think if the hon. Gentleman looks back on the various statements I have made about tough negotiations and difficult choices being made, he will know the answer to that question.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The only thing that the Prime Minister has been consistent about in recent months is that her deal is the only deal on the table, so the reality is that tweaking bits and pieces will change nothing, as has been confirmed by the Taoiseach for a start. In that vein, will the Prime Minister confirm that her decision to delay tomorrow’s vote does not mean that the requirement under the EU withdrawal Act for the Government to make a statement by 21 January if this House has not approved a deal has changed?

The Prime Minister: The legislation is clear on the position, and the Government understand that.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): The referendum was honoured when this House voted article 50 through. The deal on offer and no deal are seriously detrimental to this country, with the most vulnerable set to be the worst hit again. Truth and honesty are desperately needed in this country now; the people are entitled to it. It takes a brave person to be a true leader. Will the Prime Minister rise to the challenge, tell the House and the public that this deal and no deal are seriously detrimental, and get out to the people? We cannot lead them over a cliff like lemmings.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady started her question by saying that this House respected the result of the referendum when it triggered article 50. What triggering article 50 did was start the process of negotiation. We will honour the result of the referendum when we leave the European Union.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I have no confidence whatsoever in the Prime Minister renegotiating or amending the deal, the backstop or anything else. Given that she has refused to date to say when we may have a vote on the amended deal, will she at least stop the clock on the article 50 process? Or is this really a threat, as it seems to have been from the response to many of my colleagues, of her deal or no deal?

The Prime Minister: We have triggered the article 50 process. I believe that we have a responsibility to deliver on the vote in the referendum. This Parliament put the exit date into legislation, and we will be leaving on 29 March next year.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Prime Minister says that she wants certainty and protection for jobs and prosperity, but seeing as she is about to try to ditch the only legally binding part of the future relationship and her party is seeking to ditch her and take us into a hard Brexit, what guarantee does her deal give to businesses and people in my constituency of the jobs and prosperity that they want?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady seems to have misunderstood what I said in my statement and appears to think that we are abandoning in total the legally binding aspect of the deal that has been agreed. She talks about protecting jobs, and that is exactly why we have negotiated and set out clearly the ambitious free trade agreement for the future and the free trade area that would enable us to protect jobs up and down the country.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): After two years of telling us that no deal is better than a bad deal, it is an insult to our intelligence to tell us that no deal is so catastrophic that we have to vote for the Prime Minister’s bad deal, yet at the same time she says, “Don’t worry, we’ve prepared for a no deal.” When it comes to no deal, the reality is that she had a Brexit Secretary who did not know how important the port of Dover was and a Transport Secretary who did not bother to visit the port of Dover from June 2016 to October 2018. That is how far behind the Government
are in their no-deal preparations. Is the Prime Minister not insulting our intelligence further by saying that she is ready, and is it not the case that she has never had control of this situation?

The Prime Minister: The no-deal preparations will continue, as I said earlier in my statement.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Donald Tusk has just tweeted that he “will not renegotiate” anything, “including the backstop”, but will discuss how the UK can facilitate ratification. Given that a no deal would be a disaster and the article 50 ruling this morning stated that we could revoke it, is it not in the Government’s power, if we reach a point where we risk no deal, to revoke article 50?

The Prime Minister: Revoking article 50 means staying in the European Union. That was not what people voted for in 2016.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): On Postal Workers Day, I thank all MPs for the extra Brexit mail.

Prime Minister, earlier you said:

“On the morning after the referendum two and a half years ago, I knew that we had witnessed a defining moment for our democracy.”

Prime Minister, this is a defining moment in our democracy. Your deal has failed, so will you call a general election or will you resign, just like David?

The Prime Minister: No.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let me gently say to Members that in some cases it may be done for emphasis, in which case it is an abuse, and in some cases it may be inadvertent, but there is a dangerous tendency developing on both sides of the House, which we have witnessed today, for Members to use the word “you”. Debate goes through the Chair and “you” refers to the Chair, so Members should not use it. I have been trying to educate the extraordinarily diligent and amiable hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for several years not to say, “Minister, will you do this, that or the other?”, and I do not want the infection to spread, if I can put it that way.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Many constituents have contacted me about the withdrawal agreement. I had hoped to speak in the debate later to put forward their views, as well as my own. The Prime Minister said earlier that she wanted to take Members’ concerns back to the EU. How can she do that if she shuts down the debate tonight—or do my constituents’ views not count?

The Prime Minister: I set out the position the Government are taking in the statement I gave earlier.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Prime Minister said in her statement:

“Those Members who continue to disagree need to shoulder the responsibility of advocating an alternative solution that can be delivered”.

I came here today to make a speech in the debate to advocate an alternative position and to vote tomorrow. The Prime Minister is clearly running down the clock, playing a game of brinkmanship that is dangerous for our businesses, such as Jaguar Land Rover. Does not she accept that, by denying Parliament a vote tomorrow, she is preventing any alternative solution to be proposed unless article 50 is extended?

The Prime Minister: There are a number of alternatives that Members of this House have already put forward in debate, and not just in the debate that has taken place during the three days so far. But so far there has clearly not been any consensus across the House for any alternative arrangement. The House will have to come to a decision about whether to go forward with a deal or not in due course.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): The Prime Minister has warned the House of the risk of dividing the country and a loss of faith in our democracy. Does not she recognise that, if we press on regardless, if we take Scotland out of the EU against its will on the back of a UK-wide vote that was only narrowly won and won with extensive rule breaking by the leave campaign, she will do exactly that? If she has not got the guts to put a vote before this House or the people, is not it time for her to resign?

The Prime Minister: As I explained in the statement, we are deferring the vote so that we can have these further discussions with the European Union. But as I have pointed out to the hon. Gentleman and to his right hon. and hon. Friends on a number of occasions, from the point of view of the economy of Scotland and jobs in Scotland, the most important element for Scotland’s economy is to stay within the internal market of the United Kingdom.
Business of the House

6.22 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): In the light of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s statement, I would like to make a short business statement confirming the business for the remainder of this week:

Tuesday 11 December—Consideration of Lords amendments to the Ivory Bill—[Interruption.] Followed by a general debate on fuel poverty.

Wednesday 12 December—Remaining stages of the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill [Lords].

Thursday 13 December—General debate on the public health model to reduce youth violence. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) is burbling away from a sedentary position and has been doing so on a recurrent basis throughout the past couple of hours. He is displaying delinquent tendencies and I want him to curb them.

Andrea Leadsom: Friday 14 December—The House will not be sitting.

I will make a further business statement in the usual way on Thursday.

6.23 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I just clarify something with the Leader of the House? Did she say that there would be a further debate after the Ivory Bill? We did not quite hear that properly. I thank the Leader of the House for her statement and for the business for the next few days.

Before I get to the matter of the deferred debate and the vote, I would like to register our deep dissatisfaction that the Government have announced a substantive debate on the remaining stages of the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill for Wednesday. This is an important Bill and proper notice should have been given to the House to ensure that Members had proper time to table amendments and to prepare to scrutinise the Bill. By giving less than two sitting days’ notice, it is now impossible for Members to table amendments that will not be starred. But I suppose the Leader of the House is quite grateful that she never supported the proposals.

On Tuesday 4 December, this House unanimously agreed a business of the House motion, which sets the rules and timetable governing the meaningful vote debate. The Prime Minister has today unilaterally announced that she will, in her words: “defer the vote scheduled for tomorrow and not proceed to divide the House at this time”.

Neither the Prime Minister nor the Leader of the House have today confirmed the date for the conclusion of the debate or the votes. That shows a complete disregard for Parliament and for the rights of the House, as well as for the 164 hon. Members who have already spoken in the debate, and I think almost the same number of hon. Members—perhaps more—planned to speak today and tomorrow. Once again, the decisions of Parliament are being ignored. It is clear, as the Prime Minister admitted in her statement, that she has decided to avoid a heavy defeat on her deal in the House of Commons tomorrow. Again, Parliament is being given no opportunity to express its view on her negotiation.

Mr Speaker, you earlier set out two options available to the Government to alter the business. The first “infinitely preferable” option is for a Minister to propose moving to the Adjournment so that the House has an opportunity to vote on this proposition. The second is that the Government Whips does not move the debate on the meaningful vote for today. It cannot be right that the Government can unilaterally alter arrangements once this House has agreed on a timetable without the House being given an opportunity to express its will. The public will look at the behaviour of the Government and how they treat their democratically elected representatives and despair—the Government are denying the vote because they are going to lose.

Our constitution works on the basis that the Government control the business of the House of Commons because they have a majority in this House. However, the Government appear to be avoiding a vote on a change to the business because they fear they do not command a majority. Can the Leader of the House confirm whether the debate will be resumed and completed this side of Christmas? Does she think it is reasonable to wait until Thursday before confirming the business for the final sitting week before Christmas? Can she also confirm that the House will rise for the Christmas recess on Thursday 20 December and return on Monday 7 January 2019? [Laughter.] Can she confirm that Parliament will be given an opportunity to debate and inform the Government’s negotiating strategy with the EU? Can she confirm that they will not bring forward the implementation Bill next week before Parliament has made a decision on a section 13 approval motion? Most importantly, can the Leader of the House please confirm that the Government will treat Parliament with respect, honour the terms of the original business of the House motion as agreed, and therefore seek to move a motion for the adjournment after the statements today, so that this House, not the Prime Minister, agrees whether to defer the meaningful vote?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her questions. She asks about the business on Tuesday 11 December. Consideration of Lords amendments to the Ivory Bill will be followed by a general debate on fuel poverty.

The hon. Lady asks about the business of the House motion. What I can say is that, in strict procedural terms, our intention this evening after the ministerial statements is to defer the debate until “tomorrow”. Members will be aware that this is a very common procedure. The Government often name “tomorrow” as the next date in deferring an order of the day—for example, we do this at the end of a Second Reading debate. It is then for the Government to decide when to bring that order back for debate. That is in line with the normal convention that the Government decide on the order of business.

The hon. Lady asks whether the House will still rise for Christmas on 20 December and return on 7 January. What I can say to her is that the House has agreed—that that recess is accepted. It is therefore a matter for the
House. So the House will rise for Christmas as planned. She asks whether—[Interruption.]
She asks whether there will be time for debate—[Interruption.]
I can say to the hon. Lady—[Interruption.]
Mr Speaker, would you like to call for order?

Mr Speaker: I cannot actually hear what the Leader of the House is saying. If she wants to repeat the last sentence, because it was not remotely audible to me—I am not suggesting that it is her fault, but it simply was not heard. It is important that what is said in this Chamber is heard, so perhaps she would care to return to the Dispatch Box and repeat what it is she was saying.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Obviously, I will be dependent on you to keep order in the Chamber so that I can be heard—

Mr Speaker: Order. I have no difficulty whatsoever doing that, and I will continue to do that. What I am asking the Leader of the House to do is to furnish the House with the information that was requested. I am inordinately grateful to her.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The hon. Lady asked whether the House will rise for the Christmas recess as planned. What I said is that the House has already decided that it will rise for the Christmas recess on 20 December and return on 7 January.

The hon. Lady asks about time to debate Brexit. I can absolutely assure her, as she will know, that the Government have a very good record in making sure that the House has plenty of time to debate Brexit—[Interruption.]
During the passage of the European (Withdrawal) Act 2018, both Houses played an essential role in scrutinising and improving the legislation, with 37 days of debate spanning 11 months, and with over 1,400 amendments debated and almost 280 hours given for time to debate. We have ensured that there are regular debates in Government time, including the two-day debate on European affairs in March and the debate on legislating for the withdrawal agreement in September, so I can assure all hon. and right hon. Members that the Government will make sure that there is plenty of time for further debates on Brexit, including on the meaningful vote—[Hon. Members: “When?”]
What I can say to the House is that the Government are under a statutory obligation under section 13(1)(b) of the EU withdrawal Act to have the withdrawal agreement approved by a motion in this House. In such circumstances, the business of the House motion agreed on 4 December will need to be updated through a further business motion.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How firm should any plans we might make for the first week in January be?

Andrea Leadsom: As I just said to the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), the House has already decided that it will return on 7 January next year.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for this hastily arranged and paltry business statement. It is absolutely no wonder whatsoever that this statement was given to shrieks of laughter from Members on these Benches. This is the ultimate humiliation for the Leader of the House and for this Prime Minister. How they can look this House in the eye and try to suggest and pretend that this is business as usual is quite extraordinary. Our constituents are watching this farce with bewilderment and bewilderment, with no idea how this country is being run, and the Leader of the House comes up with no way forward for all of this.

This is the most extraordinary moment in our political life—a moment when people will ask, “Where were you on Brexit crisis day?” We have now reached the single biggest political crisis since Suez, with the biggest capitulation since Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow. I asked the Leader of the House last week if this vote would go ahead, regardless of what emerged or how much they feared defeat. She said that it most definitely would. Even one hour before this huge U-turn, the Government were still briefing that there would be a vote. Now, of course, there is no vote and there might not be one until 21 January—a monumental act of political cowardice.

What we want to hear from the Leader of the House tonight is that this House, and this House alone, will determine whether we have the vote tomorrow. It must be No. 1 of what the Leader set out on how we address this. There must be a Minister coming to that Dispatch Box and asking for this motion to be adjourned. We cannot have it any other way. It is up to this House to decide whether the vote should go ahead or not. So far, 167 Members have spoken and half as many again were due to speak tonight or tomorrow. This is a huge disrespect to all honourable colleagues in this place.

The one other thing that we need to see on a business motion is an opportunity to test the confidence of the House in this Government. There must now be a motion put forward after all that we have had—after this humiliating climbdown and after things being withdrawn that we should be voting on. That is what this country now expects us to do—have a vote of confidence in this Government, which almost certainly will and should be defeated.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman suggests that somehow this is a lack of respect. I think that what this demonstrates is that the Prime Minister has very carefully listened to the many hundreds of colleagues who have already expressed their grave concerns—myself included —on the issues around the backstop. The Prime Minister has taken those views on board, and she has ensured that she will now go away and seek further reassurances from the European Union before coming back to this place, so that she can seek an agreement that this House can accept. I believe that that shows absolute respect for this Parliament.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): When we come to resume this debate, whatever that will be, will it be a continuation of the debate over the last three days, or will it be a new debate?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend is right to point out that we will require the business of the House motion that was agreed on 4 December to be updated through a further business motion. In terms of precisely how that will take place, that is something on which I will be keen to hear from all hon. and right hon. Members, and it will, of course, be discussed through the usual channels.
Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): This Government are once again showing complete contempt for this sovereign Parliament. Why will she not put the shabby idea of taking this vote away from us—this sovereign Parliament—to a vote in this House, rather than doing it unilaterally? This can only end very badly for the Government if they continue to ignore the will of this House.

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman makes it clear that he wishes to undermine the will of the people of this country—[Interruption.] What the Government are making clear is that we are determined to bring a withdrawal agreement to this House that the House can support in the national interest and abiding by the will expressed by the people in the referendum.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): What the Government have done today is shameful. It is a complete abuse of this House. Having been found in contempt recently for the first time in living memory, they have now gone for a “buy one, get one free.” The whole House wanted to debate this. We wanted to vote on it. The people expected us to vote on it, and the Government have gone and run away and hidden in the toilets. People watching this on television will be confused and bemused, and very, very angry at the way their own Parliament has let them down. The Government Front Benchers should literally be ashamed of themselves.

Andrea Leadsom: I simply do not agree with my right hon. Friend’s assessment. What the Government are seeking to do is to go back to the European Union to get further reassurances, so that this House can support a deal that is in the national interest. As the Prime Minister said in her almost three-hour statement just now, she recognises that the House—many hon. and right hon. Members—have grave concerns about the backstop arrangements, and she is determined to see that resolved and to come back to this place as soon as possible to resume the debate and have that vote.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I have the greatest respect for the right hon. Lady and I am sure that she is feeling very uneasy about what she is doing today. Given that Parliament has already decided that the Government were in contempt, can she now bring back the legal advice for the rest of the withdrawal agreement—not just the backstop—which was what Parliament asked for?

Andrea Leadsom: The advice published was the final advice the Attorney General gave to the Cabinet on 14 November. That was the legal advice that fulfilled the terms of the Humble Address. On the hon. Lady’s point about the Government not abiding by procedures, I have to say that the Government are absolutely abiding by procedures. As hon. Members will know, we always at the end of a Second Reading debate name “tomorrow”, which in parliamentary terminology means “not now”. It is either now or another time, for which the terminology is “tomorrow”. That is normal House procedure, and there is nothing unusual about it.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The Prime Minister says she did not want to go back to square one, but that is precisely what she has done in attempting to terminate this debate. Like many other Members, I represented my community last week, and my constituents will be shocked to see that this debate has now been curtailed. Will the business motion the Leader of the House plans to introduce respect the amendment passed by the House to last week’s business motion, and does she agree that it should be incorporated into that business motion when the Government are finally ready to introduce it?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have already said, the Government are under a statutory obligation, under section 13(1)(B) of the EU withdrawal Act, to have the withdrawal agreement approved by a motion in this House. In these circumstances, the business of the House motion agreed on 4 December would need to be updated through a further business motion. [Interruption.] If the hon. Lady would allow, I will answer the question. The Government have never disputed the fact that any motion to approve the deal is amenable. That has not changed.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Following on from the question from the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening), can the Leader of the House be clear? The right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) proposed an amendment, which was passed by this House, that meant that the motion under the withdrawal Act would be amendable. When they bring back the business motion, whenever that is, will the Government ensure that the amendment is incorporated into that business motion so that it is amendable by the House?

Andrea Leadsom: As I said to my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening), the Government have never disputed the fact that any motion to approve the deal is amendable. That has not changed. That means that, when the vote comes back to the House, the business of the House motion agreed on 4 December would need to be updated through a further business motion, and that in itself would be amendable.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will happily take the point of order afterwards.

Hilary Benn: It is on this very issue.

Mr Speaker: I still think it preferable to take it at the end of the statement. I will be happy to take it then, if it is of procedural relevance, which I am sure it is.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the Leader of the House tell us whether the resolution of the House passed on 4 December relating to the Attorney General’s advice will apply to any further arrangements that may be offered to the House as a result of any further negotiations over the next week or so? If it is not the same withdrawal agreement, there must be a question about whether that motion stands, because it relates to something that happened beforehand and not to anything that might emerge afterwards.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend will recall that the Attorney General answered significant questions and wrote a large document setting out the whole legal position on the withdrawal agreement. Should there be
significant changes, I think that the Attorney General would certainly set out the legal position on those changes but, in direct response to my hon. Friend, he will appreciate that the terms of the Humble Address he refers to were met with the production of the Attorney General’s advice.

**Ms Angela Eagle** (Wallasey) (Lab): The Leader of the House was extremely coy in her answers to the questions from the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves) about whether the amendment to the motion that we were discussing—before the Government decided to pull it today—which was passed ahead of the debate and which replaced the neutral and unamendable motion that the Government were planning to put to this House, would be replaced with one that was amendable. She has been asked twice now, and she has been very coy and not forthcoming in her responses. Will she now confirm—and not just read out the phrase she has read out twice already—that when we resume this debate, the Government’s motion will not be neutral and will be amendable, and that the Government will accept the spirit of the vote we had before we began the debate?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I repeat to the hon. Lady that any business of the House motion brought forward will be amendable.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. I should say—and I am trying to help the House, but what others seek to do is a matter for them—that, so far as I am concerned, it is very clear that the amendment in the name of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) was agreed to by the House and that that amendment stands unless it is specifically repealed by a subsequent decision of the House. Unless I am mistaken—colleagues will correct me if I am wrong—that was the assurance that Members were seeking. I say on advice—and I do say so on advice—that it is a very straightforward point, the thrust of which I think I have pretty easily confirmed.

**Mrs Anne Main** (St Albans) (Con): It is a shame we did not conclude much earlier that the vote was not going to be passed, because we would not have had to go two thirds of the way through the debate. It cannot be right that we do not have a further five days when it is brought back. Everybody puts in to speak in a debate at the time, and, in theory, if we only tag on another couple of days, some colleagues will get to speak twice and some will not get to speak at all. Several hundred people have already spoken and several hundred more wish to speak. It cannot be right for the debate to be limited to two days—potentially—because it will mean that some colleagues will never have a bite at that cherry, whatever side of the House they are on.

**Andrea Leadsom**: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for her points. I can absolutely assure her that I am committed to representing the views of Parliament to the Government, and I will listen very carefully to the needs of hon. Members across the House. The exact arrangements going forward will be subject to the provisions of a business of the House motion that the House itself will have to agree.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Businesses and business organisations are hugely concerned about a Tory Immigration Bill that will not allow them to attract new skilled migrants to fill jobs here. Can the Leader of the House tell us when the Immigration White Paper and Bill will come forward?

**Andrea Leadsom**: I certainly share the hon. Lady’s desire to see that Bill as soon as possible, and I can confirm that we expect to publish the White Paper before the end of the year. It is vital that we have an immigration system going forward that is fair to businesses that need to attract employees from overseas, but also fair to those people in the UK who voted for the UK Parliament to be able to control our borders.

**Mr Speaker**: Order. May I gently say, and with good humour, to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and to the House that this is a relatively narrow business statement from the Leader of the House, and that the questioning on it should be similarly narrow or focused—focused, that is to say, on the business of the House for this week and changes thereto? It should not be an occasion for general inquiries about future business at some unspecified point in time. The Leader of the House signalled that there will be that regular business statement on Thursdays. I appeal to colleagues now to focus their inquiries on the more specific and narrow subject matter.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): The items just put on the agenda—on addressing fuel poverty, reducing youth violence, the workings of the courts and helping endangered species—are all very important issues to our constituents, so can the Leader of the House confirm—[Interruption.]

**Mr Speaker**: Order. As usual, everyone will have a chance to put a question. The hon. Lady is now putting her question, which she is entitled to do, and she must be heard with courtesy.

**Vicky Ford**: I do not laugh about issues such as the need to address youth violence. Can the Leader of the House confirm categorically that the House will have time to debate and to have the meaningful vote?

**Andrea Leadsom**: My hon. Friend is exactly right: important issues will be debated during the rest of the week, and I know that Members care a great deal about them. I can absolutely confirm that, under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, the Government have a statutory obligation to ensure that the withdrawal agreement is approved by a motion in the House. Without such approval, the Government would be legally unable to ratify the agreement.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I find today’s events wholly unsatisfactory. I refer not only to the rescheduling of today’s and tomorrow’s debates, but to the suggestion that I should set some store by the aspiration of receiving a meaningless assurance, which I do not. As one who was due to speak in today’s debate and to represent the wishes of those who support my view and those who do not, may I ask what efforts will be made to ensure that those of us who have not contributed thus far will have the opportunity to do so, and to honour our constituents’ views, wishes and aspirations as well as those of the House?
Andrea Leadsom: I completely understand and appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s decision to represent his constituents’ views, whatever they may be, and I applaud that. I am listening carefully, and when it does come to resuming the debate, all efforts will be made to ensure that enough time is provided for all Members who have not yet spoken to be able to do so.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Some 62% of my constituents voted to leave the EU, and I am sure that they meant us to leave with a good deal and not just any deal. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the steps that the Government have taken today will ensure that they get what they voted for?

Andrea Leadsom: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. It was vital for the Government to listen carefully to the grave concerns that were expressed about the backstop. The Prime Minister has spent the best part of three hours assuring the House that she intends to go and seek reassurance about those important points, so that the House will then be able to support the deal which, in the Government’s opinion, will be in the best interests of the whole United Kingdom.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): This afternoon, the Prime Minister said that she had been heavily influenced by speeches that had been made in the debate. The difficulty is that there are many more Members who wish to speak and whose voices have not yet been heard. Does the Leader of the House not accept that that is very discourteous to those Members, and does she not accept that the habit of contempt seems to be becoming hardwired in the Government?

Andrea Leadsom: This is the opposite of contempt. This is a Prime Minister who is listening. Since the House returned from recess in October, she has spent more than 20 hours at the Dispatch Box, which is more than equivalent to a 30-minute session of Prime Minister’s Question Time on every day that the House has sat since then. She has listened carefully to concerns, and Members should appreciate the fact that she will now seek to address those concerns before returning to the House for that meaningful vote.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): In these extraordinary times, is it not obvious that it is in the national interest for the Prime Minister to spend a few extra days getting a deal that is in the national interest?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is vital for us to take into account the concerns that have been raised in the House. An enormous decision is before us, and we must address all those concerns and come back to the House when we have something that we feel Members in all parts of the House will be able to support.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): This is a farce. Along with other members of the Treasury Committee, I have spent days toiling to produce a report for the biggest vote for a generation, only for it to be pulled at the last minute in favour of Lords amendments to the Ivory Bill. However, this is also a farce that has real costs. Sterling is tumbling, and we face a crisis. I must say to the Leader of the House: bring forward the vote. It has to happen.

Andrea Leadsom: I assure the hon. Lady that it will happen.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I cannot be the only Member who has turned down a number of requests to attend pre-Christmas constituency events this week. People understood that I had to be here because of the business, but now they understand that none of us needed to be here today.

Not for the first time, for purely party political advantage, the Government have played fast and loose with parliamentary business by making last-minute changes. All that comes at a cost—the significant cost of unnecessary travel and accommodation booked by Members who would not have made those bookings had the Government come clean about their plans last week. Given that this week’s business has inexplicably and unexpectedly become much lighter, will the Leader of the House find time for a short debate on how much of that additional cost should fall on the taxpayer and how much should be refunded by the Conservative and Unionist party?

Andrea Leadsom: These are sitting days, and the hon. Gentleman’s duty, like that of all Members, is to be in the Chamber. If he chooses not to be here, that is a matter for him, but these are sitting days, and important business of the House will be dealt with tomorrow. We will consider the amendments to the Ivory Bill, and there will then be a very important debate on fuel poverty.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Perhaps the Leader of the House would consider changing the name of her party to the “Conservative and Contemptuous party”, given the way in which it has treated this sovereign Parliament over the past few days. I was due to speak today, not so that Parliament could hear my voice but so that it could hear the voices of my constituents, many thousands of whom have emailed me over the past few days asking me to speak and to make their voices heard. Will the Leader of the House come to the Dispatch Box and offer them an apology?

Andrea Leadsom: We will ensure that there is time for all Members to express their views. [HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] It is absolutely vital for the Prime Minister to be given a little time to go back and look again at the backstop issues, so that all Members will be able to support this deal.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): May I channel what was said by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) about a matter of huge parliamentary and procedural significance, and ask “Is this it?”

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government have decided that the Prime Minister should seek to address the concerns raised by Members further before coming back to the House with a meaningful vote, so that we can also address those concerns. I believe that that shows complete respect for this place.
Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): A few moments ago, the Leader of the House said that the Prime Minister had spent three hours reassuring us that she would seek some reassurances. Does the Leader of the House understand that when a motion is brought back for us to vote on the withdrawal agreement, the only thing that will make a difference is for changes to be made to the text of the agreement? Does she understand that?

Andrea Leadsom: Let me first point out to my hon. Friend that the Prime Minister was here answering questions on all aspects of the withdrawal agreement. She was not here simply to reassure people; she was listening to all Members. In answer to the second part of my hon. Friend’s question, let me say that I think the Prime Minister fully understands that there are serious questions about the backstop, and a desire on the part of Members to see changes in the legal text.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It is sad, really: we often boast about our historical freedoms and liberties and we often preach to other countries about how to run parliamentary democracy, but, to be honest, this is a prime example of how not to do it. I would have had respect for the Leader of the House and the Government if they had come forward with a motion saying, “All right, we’ll put it to the House that we are not going to put it to the House,” but they are instead relying on a shabby little trick, where a Government Whip will just shout “Tomorrow,” which in this Parliament does not mean tomorrow: it means mañana; it means never. It is a shabby little trick, and is not the ultimate irony that the Government are preventing the people from having a vote on it and preventing the Commons from having a vote on it, but the House of Lords is going to vote on it tonight? What is good enough for earls and barons is good enough for us.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman knows that that is a bit of parliamentary pantomime. He knows full well that the Government often name tomorrow as the next date for deferring an Order of the Day. So after a First Reading, when naming a date for the Second Reading debate if it is not “Now” then it is “Tomorrow,” and then the Government decide. There is nothing unusual about that at all.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The Leader of the House knows that:

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day.”

Will it also be:

“To the last syllable of recorded time”?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said to a number of hon. Members, we will bring the meaningful vote back to this House. There will be a further business motion that will be amendable, as soon as the Prime Minister has been able to seek the reassurances that will enable this House to support a motion that will be in the national interest. That is in the best interests of the whole United Kingdom, and it is vital that we get it right.

Alison Thewlis (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituents sent me here this week to vote against this deal. I spent the weekend trying to explain to people the processes of this House, the process that would happen and what might occur afterwards; what am I to tell them now?

Andrea Leadsom: That the Prime Minister is seeking the reassurances that will enable the House to support a deal that works for the whole United Kingdom.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House has announced that we will be debating the Ivory Bill. Is not the reality that the big elephant in the room is the statement this afternoon by the European Union Council President Donald Tusk that the EU is not prepared to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement at all? So is not that the reality, and does it not show that this whole proceeding is a total farce?

Andrea Leadsom: In congratulating the hon. Gentleman on a proper piece of parliamentary pantomime, I say that the basis of his argument is flawed. He will appreciate that this is a negotiation. The UK has a strong hand; it is vital that the EU understands that the UK needs reassurances about the backstop.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): First, I wonder whether the Leader of the House can tell us if an abandoned debate is like an abandoned football match, whereby people’s names are expunged from the records. Secondly, who is going to take responsibility for this farce first—the Prime Minister or the right hon. Lady as Leader of the House—and who is going to walk first?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said to many hon. Members, the purpose of changing the date of the vote is to enable the Prime Minister to address the very real concerns expressed by many Members.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I was hoping to speak on the withdrawal agreement on behalf of my constituents this evening, and I will now be denied that chance. Can the Leader of the House tell me if it is now Government policy to reopen negotiations on that withdrawal agreement and change its text, something many Ministers have said in recent weeks was not possible?

Andrea Leadsom: The Prime Minister intends to seek to address the concerns expressed about the backstop and our inability to unilaterally get out of it. That is what she is seeking to address, and she will absolutely do her best in the national interest.

Anna Turley (Redcar) (Lab/Co-op): In the previous statement, the Prime Minister’s only argument against the people’s vote was that it will make people lose faith in democracy. What on earth must the British public be thinking about our democracy on the day the Prime Minister runs away from losing a vote when she has had Ministers out defending her deal for days and days and hundreds of MPs are unable to speak to represent their constituents? Who is making a mockery of our democracy now?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady has it exactly the wrong way around: the Prime Minister is listening to this House and is acting on what she is hearing from
this House. It is an entirely different matter from a second referendum that simply tells all those 17.4 million people that they got it wrong.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Can we just put paid to the nonsense that the reason why we are in this mess is that we have a listening Prime Minister? The Prime Minister has come to the House today and made out that she wants to go back to the negotiations because the speeches on the first few days have been the biggest surprise to her since the Immaculate Conception. This is absolute nonsense. If she had listened from the outset, she would have realised that the Chequers agreement did not command a majority of this House. Why are the Government determined to repeat the same mistake by rushing back to the negotiating table not to renegotiate the withdrawal agreement, but just to try and get a few paper-based compromises? Why can we not have a substantial debate in this House this week about what our negotiating objectives should be, so that we have the support of the whole House before the negotiations, rather than the Government losing to the House after the negotiations?

Andrea Leadsom: First, I think the hon. Gentleman could at least appreciate the number of hours the Prime Minister has spent in this place listening and the fact that it is precisely because she has been listening to this House that she is going back to the EU to seek to address the concerns raised by this House. Hon. Members should appreciate that fact.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Tomorrow will be 108 days until the date of Brexit. If the Prime Minister and the Leader of the House intend to put this off for perhaps another month, that will mean we are down to 77 days. What then? Will the Prime Minister simply pick up the goalposts, run down the football pitch and position them then where she thinks the ball might land, and if it does not, pick them up again and run a bit further for another 31 days? How long will this farce continue, because frankly I can hear the sound of belief being beggared in Bristol West from here?

Andrea Leadsom: The Prime Minister will return to this House to resume the debate to pass a meaningful vote once she has sought those reassurances.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is the role of the Leader of the House to present the Government’s case to this Chamber, but it is also the role of the Leader of the House to reflect what this Chamber says and does. Will the right hon. Lady now go back to the next Cabinet and really reflect on the anger being felt across this whole House and give us a meaningful vote?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I take my role of reflecting Parliament’s views in the Government very seriously, as much as I do my role of reflecting Government’s views in Parliament, so, yes, I most certainly will take that very seriously. But on the question of the vote, I think equally that all hon. Members must appreciate that it was clear that the will of the House was that further work should be done to ensure the UK could not be held in a backstop against its will, and therefore the Prime Minister is seeking to address that before we come back to this place to resume the vote.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Leader of the House not a little ashamed to be here today, running away from the Government’s own major policy? It is a Government who are showing complete contempt for this House—for all views in this House. There are many Members who do not agree with me on Brexit, but they are going to be stifled as well by not being able to speak and not being able to vote on this, and we are not able to represent our constituents properly. Let us be clear about what is really going on here: the Prime Minister is playing for time—a few more days into next week—to go away and get some sort of exchange of letters. She cannot renegotiate the withdrawal agreement; Donald Tusk has made that very clear—it is a legally binding document. So why do the Government not just accept the reality, put this question before this House, and if this House does not agree, put the question back to the people?

Andrea Leadsom: First, the hon. Gentleman is obviously quite wrong. I am not running scared; I am actually here at the Dispatch Box. On his point about what the Prime Minister is seeking to do, he will appreciate that for the Government to ratify the withdrawal agreement, the meaningful vote must be passed in this House. The Prime Minister is seeking the means by which to ensure that she can win the vote in this House.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It cannot have come as a surprise to the Prime Minister that so many people spoke against her deal. It has been clear for months, if not a whole year, that that was going to happen. As one of the 164 people who have spoken in this debate—indeed, I sat here for eight hours and was called to speak at 25 to 1 in the morning—I should like to know whether we are talking about a continuation of the debate, or whether the speeches of the 164 will fall? Will we need to apply to speak again to count as having spoken on the meaningful vote?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will appreciate that there are discussions through the usual channels about exactly what the business motion of the House will look like. The question of calling speakers is a matter for the Chair.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The Prime Minister has told us repeatedly today that there is no new deal and that the text of the deal will not be changed. Donald Tusk has confirmed that, so the deal will not change. She is preventing Members from speaking in a debate on the deal. What is the purpose of deferring the vote on the deal when the deal will not be changed?

Andrea Leadsom: The Prime Minister has been clear that the vote will take place when she believes she has the legal assurances that Parliament needs that the backstop will not be permanent.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I was also one of the people who was going to speak in the debate today, to reflect the wishes and views of my constituents, so I am extremely disappointed that the
Leader of the House and the Prime Minister have decided to pull the rest of the debate and to cancel the vote tomorrow. The Leader of the House also appears to be ensuring that this is done in such a way that the House will be unable to vote on whether or not this should happen, despite the fact that Mr Speaker said earlier that it would be infinitely preferable to allow the House to make its views known in a vote. It seems to me that the Leader of the House and this Government are increasingly trying to avoid votes in this House. Does the right hon. Lady not realise that that is untenable, that it will not stand and that the House will assert its rights over this appalling Government?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that scheduling business is a matter for the Government and that the proposal for the rescheduling of the meaningful vote is therefore, under normal procedures, a matter for the Government. That is what we intend to fulfil.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have already been found in contempt of this House, and now they wish to be in contempt of the British people. I was due to speak later today, but I and my constituents will be denied that. When will the debate be rescheduled? Give us a date, or at least a timeframe; otherwise, based on past practice and without details, there is not much else that I can believe about the Leader of the House’s promises.

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said a number of times, we will resume the debate as soon as possible once the Prime Minister has sought the reassurances that the backstop will not be permanent, which the House has made it clear that it requires.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House’s job is not only to bring Government business to the House but to uphold the integrity of the institutions of the Government and of Parliament in the wider country. How is it going to look to my constituents, hundreds of whom have written to me in the past few days in anticipation of the debate and the meaningful vote, when they see this spectacle of gerrymandering and this tawdry, arcane manipulation of parliamentary rules to suit a Prime Minister who is failing and dead on her feet? Can the Leader of the House actually stand here with any degree of integrity and uphold that situation?

Andrea Leadsom: There is really nothing unusual in using the deferral of a vote to tomorrow. It is used every time we have a First Reading when scheduling a Second Reading.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is unacceptable for the Government to change business of this magnitude with so little notice. It is equally unacceptable that we still have no date for a meaningful vote, so will the Leader of the House commit to come to the House on Thursday with a date for this vote?

Andrea Leadsom: As I have said to a number of hon. Members, the Prime Minister is determined to address the expressed concerns of many Members of this House, and once she has been able to do so, she will return to the House. That will be as soon as possible.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister wanted to take us out of the European Union without a meaningful vote in this House. The Leader of the House has talked on several occasions about resuming the debate. Will the 164 Members, of whom I am one, get the opportunity to make another contribution to a new debate, or will we be resuming the old debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is asking about who will be called to speak, and I can tell him that that is a matter for Mr Speaker.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Leader of the House is making a mockery of the procedures of the House of Commons. This is not the same as a First Reading and a Second Reading. The difference here is that a motion of the House is already in existence for the debate to take place today and tomorrow, yet she is going to ask her Whips to perpetrate the fiction of saying that the debate will continue tomorrow when she has already announced that we are going to debate the Ivory Bill, because she is afraid that if she put the question to a vote of the House, she would lose. She knows that she would lose, so why will she not just be honest with the House and admit that?

Andrea Leadsom: I have been absolutely clear with the House that the Prime Minister has listened to the views of the House as expressed in recent weeks and that she is determined to address the concerns that have been raised. The House needs to be presented with a withdrawal agreement and a political declaration that Members across the House can support. The Prime Minister made it quite clear that she did not feel confident that Members would be able to support it and that it would therefore not be in the national interest to go ahead with it until she had managed to address those very real concerns.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House not realise the level of fury that exists in Parliament about the way in which she has changed the business? Does she also not realise that, as Leader of the House—one of the great offices of state—she is supposed to speak for Parliament? She is supposed to be the voice of Parliament to the Cabinet, not the voice of the Cabinet to Parliament. Will people outside not look at her statement with incredulity? A vote that every person in this country was expecting tomorrow is to be denied, and the people of this country will feel disfranchised and feel that the Leader of the House speaks for the Government and not for Parliament.

Andrea Leadsom: I take my duties as Leader of the House extremely seriously. They are to be Parliament’s spokesman in the Government as much as to be the Government’s spokesman in Parliament. I can absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman of that. I am listening very carefully, but it is nevertheless in the national interest that we go away and seek further reassurances before coming back to the House for the meaningful vote.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I wish the Leader of the House would stop talking about the national interest when what she is actually talking about is the Conservative party’s interests. This House passed a business motion with specific dates and times
for the debate to take place. Of course the Government can choose when to schedule business, but we have agreed a business motion proposing a debate and a vote at a certain time, and I fail to understand how she can stand there today and say that it will be acceptable later on for one of the Whips to shout “Tomorrow” for the continuation of the debate, when we are in fact going to be debating the Ivory Bill tomorrow and not the motion that we in this House all agreed we wanted to debate.

Andrea Leadsom: I understand the hon. Lady’s concerns, and I can assure her that the Government will return with the meaningful vote once the Prime Minister has addressed the concerns expressed by hon. Members right across the House. It is simply not right to say the Government are looking at Conservative party interests. The Government are looking at delivering on the will of the people expressed in the referendum in 2016, where a significant number of people voted to leave the European Union. That is the absolutely essential task of this Government in bringing back this meaningful vote.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It cannot be comfortable for the Leader of the House to come here to front up this sorry act of political cowardice. Has she heard today the voices of the majority of hon. and right hon. Members in this House, who see it as a further contempt of this place?

Andrea Leadsom: I always listen very carefully in this place, and I will continue to do so. I simply do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. I think it is essential that we bring back a withdrawal agreement that Members can support.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The Government have, in the middle of the debate, pulled the most important business this House has debated for a very long time. That is extraordinary. More extraordinary is the fact that the Leader of the House has given no indication about when the debate will be resumed. “As soon as possible” is not good enough when the futures of millions of people in this country, particularly EU nationals, depend on it. If she will not give us a day or a week, will she give us a month when the debate will take place?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that the Government are under a statutory obligation to have the deal approved via a motion in this House. Without such approval, the Government would legally be unable to ratify the withdrawal agreement. In order to bring forward the legislation that would enable us to enter into that withdrawal agreement, we will need to make that as soon as possible, so he can rest assured that that will be the case.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I do not wish to be disrespectful, but the Leader of the House sounds more like somebody who is telephoning to postpone a dental appointment than somebody who is changing our schedule. This is incredibly serious. Also incredibly serious is the fact that the theme for today’s debate, which will now not happen, was the Union. Many people across the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, with very different views, have really important perspectives on that. Can she assure us that that matter will be discussed again, and when will that happen?

Andrea Leadsom: I can assure the hon. Lady that that matter will be discussed again as soon as possible.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House has been reminded several times that her role is to represent Parliament at the Cabinet, and not the other way around. I politely say to her that this was not about amending anything; it was about this House wanting to vote down the deal tomorrow. She previously confirmed that the Government would follow the recommendations in the report by the Procedure Committee, of which I am a member. Whenever this farce comes back, can she confirm that there will be five days of continuous debate, as has been set out? That is the only thing that the House will accept.

Andrea Leadsom: I point out to the hon. Gentleman that my job is indeed to represent Parliament in Government, but it is also to represent Government in Parliament. It is in the interests of this House that we get a deal that all hon. and right hon. Members can support. Regarding the exact arrangements, there will be a business of the House motion, which the House itself will have to agree.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Whether our constituents voted to leave or to remain, they want to hear this debate, and they demand and expect decisiveness from this place. I therefore ask the Leader of the House to ensure that we are given at least five minutes each in the future debate, in view of its importance to the country’s future. Will she also confirm whether the debate and vote will be before or after the publication of the new year honours list?

Andrea Leadsom: The debate will come back to this House once the Prime Minister has been able to reassure hon. and right hon. Members who have concerns about the backstop arrangements. That will be as soon as possible.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Following on from the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), last Tuesday the Prime Minister brought to the House a business of the House motion for this debate that included the words “Tuesday 11 December”. Can the Leader of the House explain why the Government introduced that motion, which she and the Prime Minister voted for, but the debate today and tomorrow will be cancelled?

Andrea Leadsom: The Prime Minister has explained clearly that she has listened to the House over the last three days of debate and concluded that she needs to do more to reassure Members prior to having a final meaningful vote. A business of the House motion will be needed to amend the prior business of the House motion so that we can have a meaningful vote after she has sought those reassurances.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Leader of the House is becoming a bit of a serial offender when it comes to moving business around. Three weeks ago,
she delayed the Offensive Weapons Bill on two occasions because Conservative Members would not support it. Today, using a shabby device, she will curtail business that was down for today, when people—including me—who promised their constituents that they would speak on the matter have not had the chance to do so. Will she make me just one promise? When she stands at the Dispatch Box, will she keep to her word?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I always keep to my word. The issue with the Offensive Weapons Bill was that some significant statements were made on that day, meaning that there would not have been adequate time to discuss the various important sets of amendments that were subject to particular knives. That is why that business was pulled. The current business is being changed so that the Prime Minister can seek the assurances that many right hon. and hon. Members would like her to seek.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP) _rose_—

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald** (Glasgow South) (SNP) _rose_—

**Mr Speaker:** I call Carol Monaghan.

**Carol Monaghan:** Good choice, Mr Speaker. I was due to speak tonight to represent the views of my constituents, and I am extremely frustrated that I will not be given that opportunity. I am also suspicious about the timing of the return of the debate. Can the Leader of the House assure us that it will not return to the House in the week beginning 24 December?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I can give the hon. Lady that assurance.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** As they say in Glasgow, the game’s a bogey. When the Government are scared of their own shadow, they do not deserve to be in office. Given that a confidence vote is surely inevitable in the not-too-distant future, can the Leader of the House confirm that there is no parliamentary instrument or trickery that she can deploy on behalf of the Government to prevent that from taking place when it is called?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Government are taking action to address the expressed concerns of hon. and right hon. Members. With regard to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, the Government have the confidence of the House. If the Opposition wish to dispute that, it is for them to test it via a motion under the terms of the Act.

---

**EU Exit: Article 50**

7.27 pm

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union** (Stephen Barclay): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the judgment issued by the European Court of Justice this morning on the Wightman case.

Today, the European Court of Justice has delivered its judgment on the question of the revocability of an article 50 notice. The Court has found that the UK has the right, in accordance with its constitutional requirements, unilaterally to revoke the notification of its intention to withdraw from the EU. We note the judgment from the European Court, the role of which is to provide rulings on the interpretation of EU law. The judgment clarifies the law, but it does not in any way change our policy. That the Government know this course is possible, just as many undesirable actions are possible, does not change the fact that such an approach is hypothetical and the Government have no intention of doing so.

The Government’s firm and long-held policy is that we will not revoke the article 50 notice. That position has not changed. To do so, or to hold a second referendum, would be to undermine the result of the 2016 referendum and the expressed concerns of hon. and right hon. Members. If the House voted to hold another referendum, the electorate then took part in the 2016 referendum, resulting in 17.4 million votes cast to leave the European Union. That is the highest number of votes cast for anything in UK electoral history, making this referendum the biggest democratic exercise in our history. The House then voted again to empower the Prime Minister to notify under article 50, and voted yet again to repeal the European Communities Act 1972.

The Government remain focused on their task, on their mandate and on delivering a deal that honours the 2016 referendum result. We will be leaving the EU on 29 March 2019. I commend this statement to the House.

7.30 pm

**Jenny Chapman** (Darlington) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

Yesterday, Andrew Marr asked the Secretary of State whether the meaningful vote was going to be delayed, and the Secretary of State said:

“The vote is on Tuesday. That is what we’re focused on.”

I know he is the new boy on the block and is very keen to impress his new boss but, like his two predecessors, I fear he has been left out of the loop. Seeing as we all have a bit more time this evening and tomorrow, can I ask when he learned that the meaningful vote would not take place tomorrow?

It has been reported that the requirement for the Government to make a statement to this House on no deal by 21 January will no longer apply following the Prime Minister’s decision to defer the vote. Can the Secretary of State clarify whether this is or is not the case? If he has not already done so, will he seek legal advice on this matter and make an urgent statement to the House tomorrow? The Government’s incompetence is not an excuse to threaten this country with no deal.
Turning to the substance of the Secretary of State’s statement, this is an important and clear judgment from the European Court of Justice and it makes three points. First, that article 50 can be unilaterally and unconditionally revoked. Secondly, that doing so would mean the terms of our European Union membership are unchanged. Thirdly, that revocation could bring the withdrawal procedure to an end. We welcome the clarity this ruling has brought.

The Government sought to block the case from even being heard by the European Court. Can the Secretary of State confirm how much taxpayers’ money was spent on trying to obstruct this predictable decision? Can he also make it clear that, if article 50 is extended due to the Government’s failure to negotiate a deal by the end of March, the Court ruling states that the UK could still unilaterally revoke article 50?

We have always been clear that the revocability of article 50 is a political matter, not a legal one. Today’s ruling underlines that. This country is yearning for political leadership from Ministers. Is it not the case that a Government cease to function when they are too scared to put votes to this House? This is a Government in name only.

Stephen Barclay: The Prime Minister addressed the first point in full detail over the course of two and a half hours. On the substance of the remarks by the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman), she will know the judgment is very clear that revocation would need to be unequivocal and unconditional. The question for her and for the Labour Front Bench is how serving such a notice could be in any way compatible with the manifesto on which Labour stood at the last election. Labour made a clear commitment to its electorate, many of whom voted to leave, that it would not seek to revoke article 50 and that it would honour the terms of the referendum. The Government’s policy has not changed. What Labour needs to address is whether its policy has changed.

It is a matter of policy that we will not revoke article 50, and therefore this is a hypothetical question. Of course the Government made their case, as they always will, in the courts, but our policy has not changed. The question for the Labour Front Bench is: has theirs?

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): As I have listened to today’s proceedings, the chances of the Government ever getting their withdrawal agreement approved by this House seem to me to be quite slight. I cannot think of any assurances the Prime Minister will get in Brussels that would change that most unfortunate situation.

I am sad that the whole thing has not been contrived to save the House from my making a speech tomorrow, in which I would have supported the withdrawal agreement. The situation is grave because, with no withdrawal agreement, we are going towards 29 March and we will leave with no agreement at all, because there are no signs of any alternative emerging. Article 50 has to be looked at.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that article 50 could only be suspended for two or three months? There are legal problems in deferring it any longer. Although the majority of Members regard themselves as bound by the opinion poll, or referendum, we held in 2016, in which absolutely none of the circumstances we are now talking about were remotely discussed with the public before the vote was taken, is it not obvious that the Government should start considering revoking article 50 to save us from the disastrous consequences of leaving with no deal? It would be disastrous for our economy, our businesses, our employment and many other things. If anybody can ever put this shambles back together again and wants to resume the process of leaving the European Union, they could go ahead and see if a future House of Commons is more receptive than this one has been.

Stephen Barclay rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before the Secretary of State replies. Can I just say to the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) that I hope he derives some succour from knowledge of the fact that he has, at least, delivered a fair share—it is not for me to say precisely what share—of the speech to which he would have treated the House tomorrow if he had had the opportunity to do so?

Stephen Barclay: I am sure that I and many in the House would have much enjoyed hearing the remarks of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). To be fair, he has always been consistent. He did not vote for the referendum, and he has always taken the view that this House should decide, but many others in this House did vote for the referendum, and they also voted by a very substantial majority to trigger article 50.

The crux of the issue is that the Government’s policy has not changed. We are not going to revoke article 50, but if the Labour party is flirting with doing so, it needs to square that with the manifesto on which it stood at the last election.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I am proud to be one of the six Scottish parliamentarians who took this action through the Scottish courts and all the way to the Court of Justice of the European Union. I did it with an SNP colleague, two Labour colleagues and two Scottish Green colleagues, which shows the strength of cross-party working and what can be achieved when the Opposition work together. I also thank Jo Maugham, QC—he was also one of the petitioners—the Good Law Project and those who crowdfunded this litigation.

The UK Government fought us every inch of the way, including attempting an unconstitutional appeal to the UK Supreme Court. No appeal to the Supreme Court lies in Scots law for an interim decision of the Inner House, so quite a lot of money was wasted on that unconstitutional appeal.

I have a number of questions for the Secretary of State. First, why were the Government so desperate to prevent parliamentarians and the public from knowing what we now know, which is that article 50 can be revoked and we can stay in the European Union on our current terms and conditions? I invite him again to answer the question asked by the hon. Member for
Darlington (Jenny Chapman). How much taxpayers’ money was spent attempting to keep this House and the public in the dark? I sat through a fair number of the court hearings, and I can tell hon. Members and the public that the UK Government had a veritable array of silks lined up on a daily basis, which does not necessarily come cheap.

The Secretary of State keeps saying that the question is hypothetical. If he has read any of the judgments of the Court of Justice or the Scottish courts, he will see that it has been ruled that the question is not hypothetical. It has been ruled that it is not for the UK Government to decide whether to revoke article 50 and that, as a matter of the British constitution, it is for this House to do so. Does he accept the view of Scotland’s most senior judge, the Lord President, Lord Carloway, that constitutionally it is for the House of Commons to revoke article 50, not the Government? The Secretary of State also says it is not Government policy to revoke article 50, but can he tell us what Government policy is at present? It is not at all clear to me today.

Finally, if the Prime Minister really does believe in this deal and that it is such a great deal for the United Kingdom, why do she and her Government not have the courage of their convictions and put it to a vote so that people across the United Kingdom can choose between it and remaining in the European Union on our current terms and conditions?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. and learned lady started by asking why the Government took this position. The position taken by the Government was the same position as taken by the Commission—

Joanna Cherry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. We cannot have a point of order at this stage. I will come to the hon. and learned Lady at a suitable juncture, and she will have an opportunity to make her point.

Stephen Barclay: We will come further to that point. The second point the hon. and learned Lady made was that legal fees are not cheap. She needs to answer, therefore, why a case was brought on something that clearly is not Government policy and that the Government have no intention of applying. Therefore, it is a hypothetical case; this is something that the Government do not intend to pursue.

The hon. and learned Lady also asked what Government policy is on this issue. The Government’s policy is extremely clear: it is to deliver on the biggest democratic vote in our country’s history and ensure that we leave on 29 March next year.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I do not think many people were really in much doubt that this was going to be the judgment of the Court; it was always pretty clear, and I was a little surprised that we spent any time on it. Notwithstanding that, it is intriguing that the Court has managed, arguably for the first time, to have an advocate-general’s opinion, followed four or five days later by the full Court’s decision—I can remember, when in government, spending three or four years waiting for the Court to come to a judgment. Does my right hon. Friend think this may have something to do with the fact that there could have been a vote tomorrow? There is a delicious irony, is there not, in the fact that we can revoke article 50 but we cannot revoke our backstop? Does he not find that funny?

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend is correct to draw attention to the fact that this was an expedited process. The typical length of time for such cases is three to six months, and on this occasion it was just over two months, but that was a reflection of the fact that the Scottish Court requested that proceedings be dealt with on this expedited basis, and the President of the Court agreed with that request.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): For two years, the Prime Minister has told the House that the only alternative to a withdrawal agreement is leaving the European Union with no deal. Can the Secretary of State confirm that today’s ruling by the European Court means that there are now two potential ways in which that could be avoided? The first is by extending article 50, and the second is by revoking it. Therefore, the Prime Minister’s threat—it would be disastrous for the country anyway—no longer has any credibility in law, does it?

Stephen Barclay: On the first point, the judgment from the Court today does not cover extension—that is addressed in article 50. It was about revocation, not extension.

Actually, I think the Prime Minister has always been clear that there is an alternative, which is to go back on the referendum result and have no Brexit. The Government do not support that option, which is why one is then left with the choice of the deal, with the certainty that the Prime Minister offers, or the uncertainty of no deal.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Minister confirm that under no circumstances whatever will the 29 March exit date be altered?

Stephen Barclay: As I said in my statement, the Government are clear that we will not be revoking article 50, and we are committed to leaving the European Union on 29 March next year.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): If the Government do not come forward with their future plan before Christmas, Government Departments and businesses across the country will be shifting staff and huge amounts of resources into preparing for no deal. To prevent that from happening, will the Secretary of State now rule out no deal and commit to seeking an extension of article 50?

Stephen Barclay: As I said in an earlier answer, the judgment of the Court does not actually deal with extension; that is a separate point. It deals with revocation, and it is that to which my statement refers. I am very happy, Mr Speaker, to stray into areas beyond the statement, such as no deal, but I do not want to fall foul of a ruling from the Chair, and I want to focus on the issue of revocation.

Mr Speaker: Well, it is principally about revocation, as the Secretary of State rightly states. Matters that appertain to article 50 would obviously be thought to
be within scope. If it were thought that a Member were out of order, I would have received advice to that effect, and the House will have noted that I have not—I have received no such indication at all. I know that the Secretary of State—he is a most courteous individual—would not for one moment suggest that he should be the arbiter of scope. He can tell us what is in his statement, but he cannot tell us what should be raised by other Members. As I say, I have had no indication that anything that has been said so far has been in any way disorderly, but I am always alert, and if I find something that is, I shall rule on it accordingly.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), it is certainly interesting that the ECJ has been able to hand down this judgment with great speed. The Brexit Secretary is far too diplomatic to agree with me that it is, of course, a political court. However, will he say that this is yet another reason why we need to comprehensively leave the European Union, including the jurisdiction of the ECJ?

Stephen Barclay: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that the Prime Minister has always been clear that we are coming out of the jurisdiction of the European Court. That is a key part of the deal that she has secured, and it is a key part of us delivering on our commitment to take back control of our money, borders and laws.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Secretary of State has been asked twice now how much British taxpayers’ money has been wasted fighting this case, and he has failed to answer. He could show the House some courtesy by answering that question. If he does not know the answer, he should just say so. However, is he honestly telling the House that if it instructed the Government to revoke article 50, they would simply ignore the will of the House?

Stephen Barclay: As the right hon. Gentleman will understand from his time as a Minister, the judgment was only today, so some of those costs for lawyers’ fees are still to come in. Costs such as that are declared, as is always the case, in the Department’s accounts. That is the standard way in which such accounts are itemised. This was a judgment that was reached today.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that it seems from the contributions of Opposition Members that it may now be their position to seek to revoke article 50? Will he confirm that it remains the Government’s policy—and that I can go back and tell my constituents in Redditch categorically—that we will not seek to revoke article 50?

Stephen Barclay: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that, in the circumstance that this House voted to revoke article 50, his Government would go along with the view expressed by the House and recognise the House’s sovereignty?

Stephen Barclay: The reality is that this judgment has just been reached today. We will need to take it away and consider what the legal implications are. The hon. Lady will know that the triggering of article 50 was subject to significant legal dispute and discussion. We will need to analyse this to understand what the implications are.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It is in everybody’s interests to try to find an amicable solution. Can the Secretary of State confirm the rumours going around on social media that the Prime Minister is due to meet the Dutch Prime Minister in the morning and to have further discussions with Michel Barnier and team during the week?

Stephen Barclay: It is for the Prime Minister to address whom she will be having discussions with, in the usual way. The key issue in terms of this statement is that this Government have no intention of changing their policy on article 50.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): The Government fought against this case tooth and nail, every stage of the way. Will the Minister now accept that it is clear to the British public that they have the right to stay in the EU if that is their choice, with no Schengen, no euro—they can keep the opt-outs. We can keep all our current privileges of European Union membership. Is it not wrong that Ministers fought against the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) and myself, as petitioners in this case, for which we had to take significant personal financial risk? We put our necks on the block to prove to our colleagues that they have the right to make this decision on behalf of our constituents if they seek to do so. Will the Minister now at least acknowledge that the Government expended public money to contest this case and they were wrong to contest it?

Stephen Barclay: I very much respect the position the hon. Gentleman takes and has consistently taken on his desire for a second referendum, but the people did have a people’s vote in 2016 and this Government are committed to honouring it—the Prime Minister addressed that in her remarks. On his second point about whether the Government spend money pursuing their policy in the courts, that was the approach when he was a Minister and it has been the approach of all Governments that I can recall.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Minister, with his excellent skill, is pumping out the Government line on article 50. He did that on Sunday on television, and we all believed him then—I expect he believed what he said then—but the Government changed their mind on that. So how do we know they are not going to change their mind on article 50?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend and I have known each other a long time. The policy of the Government has been clear on article 50, and we made that clear in the case. I hope that the criticism from Opposition Members about the fact that the Government fought this case gives him some reassurance as to our commitment to that point.
Stephen Barclay: Of course the Government accept the judgment of the Court, as would always be the case. As for whether we will look to appeal in the Scottish court, this judgment was reached today and we will need to consider that in due course.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Today’s judgment does provide more clarity to the debate, but I think my right hon. Friend would agree that many parties here will use it to drag us back, to keep us in purgatory and to try to frustrate our country and the Brexit process. Will he please give the House some assurances that after the delay today we will get certainty in the coming weeks, which my constituents and so many of my local businesses so badly need?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that businesses up and down the country want certainty, and that is what is on table; we have the certainty of the Prime Minister’s deal versus the uncertainty of no deal or the risk of going back on the biggest vote in our country’s history. I am happy to give him that assurance, and that is why this House should back the Prime Minister’s deal—it gives businesses the certainty they seek.

Stephen Barclay: First, let me pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her work as Chair of the PAC, for which she is respected across the House, and for her consistency on this point. She rightly says that she did not vote for article 50, and I understand her position. As the Prime Minister set out this afternoon, the Government have done a huge amount of no-deal planning to prepare, but not all of that is within their control. For example, it relies on the response of businesses to technical notices and on the response of other member states. The Government, through the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris), the no-deal Minister, have done a huge amount to prepare for no-deal planning, but obviously some of these issues are outwith the Government’s control.

Stephen Barclay: There was a time when the right hon. Gentleman used to believe in the democracy bit of the Liberal Democrat name. He will recall that this House voted in favour of triggering article 50, with 498 for to 114 against. One would hope that as a democrat, he would respect that decision.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I did not vote to trigger article 50 because I did not think that the Government knew what it was about, and lo and behold we now know that they did not know what it was about. Is not the real danger of delaying making a decision now that businesses up and down the land will have to make enormous contingency plans against the danger of no deal? That will involve wasted money and will lower productivity in this country. The Government will be hard-pressed to get the legislation through in time for 29 March, so I give the Minister one tiny bit of advice: stop making categorical statements, because so far every one of those he has had to make he has had to withdraw afterwards. I bet he will end up withdrawing this one when he issues the revocation of article 50.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Government have spent the past two years saying that article 50 could not be revoked, but we know now that that is not true. They spent the past two weeks saying that were definitely going to have a vote tomorrow on their Brexit deal, but we know now that that is not true. Is the Secretary of State not worried that the country might start to mistrust the Tories on Brexit?

Stephen Barclay: What is clear is that on the key issue of whether the referendum result is respected, we are clear in this House that it is our policy to deliver it—we are committed to leaving on 29 March. To protect the jobs in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and the supply of goods, and to give businesses the confidence to invest, we need to give businesses a deal. It is the Prime Minister’s deal that delivers that.
Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): First, I warmly congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and her colleagues on this thoroughly deserved and epoch-making victory. May I gently advise the Secretary of State that it is not a good look for a Minister and a Government who claim to abide by the rule of law to seek to impugn the motives of the winners in a serious court case, or to appear to agree with colleagues who want to impugn the professionalism and integrity of the court that has delivered the verdict?

The Secretary of State has confirmed that the judgment does not change the law but clarifies it, and that it does not change Government policy. Does it change the Government’s understanding of the law? He has carefully avoided the question that has been asked twice, which I will ask a third time: how much has this cost the British taxpayer? Was that money spent because the Government were badly advised and thought they could win, or was it spent criminally negligently by a Government who knew they were going to lose and continued to spend our money just for the hell of it?

Stephen Barclay: I have answered the question about the money several times. The Court judgment was reached just today, so not all the costs associated with the case will have accrued as yet. We will need to work that out in the normal way. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) will know about that from her time practising at the Bar. Again, I have already answered the question about respecting the process. We respect the Court’s decision, but the facts of the matter do not change, and they are that this Government are committed to honouring the referendum, we will ensure that we leave on 29 March next year, and we have absolutely no intention of revoking article 50.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): On behalf of the millions of Labour supporters who voted to leave, I welcome the Government’s commitment to not revoking article 50. Does the Secretary of State agree that many of the people who want to see it revoked really just want to reverse the decision of the 17.4 million? By legal means or by any means, they want to stop the British people getting what they voted for.

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady hits the nail on the head: that is the intention of some Members. To be fair, some Members are quite explicit about that. The point I am alluding to is whether that is now the official policy of those on the Labour Front Bench, because it is at odds with what Labour voters were told at the most recent general election.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Purely hypothetically, will the Secretary of State say whether it is in the national interest to have no deal or to revoke article 50?

Stephen Barclay: Instead of getting into hypotheticals, I would rather deal with reality. [Interruption.] Members on the Opposition Benches may wish to go down the hypothetical route, but I would rather deal with the reality, which is that we had the biggest vote in our country’s history, and at the most recent general election two parties stood on manifestos that said they would deliver on that vote. Any revoking of article 50 would be a huge betrayal to those voters, including those referred to by the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) in her question a moment ago.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) on her work. Is it not a great irony that the ECJ has given us much vaunted controls, but we still have Tory Brexiteers complaining? The UK now has a choice: either revoke article 50, or we in Scotland will have our second independence referendum, as Scotland voted to remain. Will the Government table a motion to revoke article 50, or do we in the Scottish National party get going with indyref 2? When they crash the economy, we are getting the lifeboat out of here.

Stephen Barclay: It was a good attempt to shoehorn the indyref debate into the one on this referendum, but the reality is that the hon. Gentleman’s party lost in that referendum. That is why it is a UK decision and the referendum in 2016 was on the basis of a United Kingdom decision. He might not like democracy—he might not like the way the vote goes—but unfortunately his side lost in 2014. One would have thought that he might have come to terms with that four years on.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Secretary of State is quite new in his post, but has he looked at the impact of today’s events on the financial markets and the value of the pound? Has he met, as I have today, a major manufacturing company with worldwide markets that is desperately worried about staying in the United Kingdom? Does he not realise that many people think we are on the cusp of an economic and financial meltdown now—not in the distant future, but now? The revocation of article 50 could help to sort that out.

Stephen Barclay: As I am sure that you, Mr Speaker, and the House recall, the hon. Gentleman voted to trigger article 50. He himself voted for it, so if he is now saying that he has changed his mind, perhaps that is the sort of uncertainty about which the financial markets have expressed concern. They look to the House for a response that will deliver them certainty for their investment and see Members like the hon. Gentleman changing their mind.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Today marks exactly 900 days since the outcome of the referendum in 2016. The Secretary of State says that there will be no article 50 revocation, but if between this morning and this afternoon the Prime Minister can change her mind about us having a vote tomorrow, why will his Government not allow the people to have a vote in a second referendum?

Stephen Barclay: One would have thought, after 900 days, that we would be clear as to what the Labour party’s policy is. It is still unclear as to whether the Leader of the Opposition thinks that we can stop Brexit or not—he said it could not be stopped and then his shadow Brexit Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), said that it could—and he was unclear as to how he would vote in a second referendum. It is unclear today whether he would actually seek to revoke article 50 and go back on the manifesto commitment that he gave.
Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Were the Government to act on today’s legal judgment, it would mean no backstop, no hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and no need for any border down the Irish sea with new trade barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State’s problem is that last week he said to the Exiting the European Union Committee that the vote tomorrow would go ahead, but it will not, and the Government said that the deal was not renegotiable, but they are now trying to renegotiate it, so why should we believe him when he says that the Government’s policy is that we will not revoke the article 50 notice, when we could not believe them on those other two matters?

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady says that she wants certainty; it is the certainty of a deal and leaving in good order that is what most businesses—most of the people who employ people in jobs—want to see, and that is what the Government are offering.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): Like his predecessors, the Secretary of State is kept in the dark about a lot, but he must know when he was first told that tomorrow’s vote was off. We know that it was not yesterday, when he said the vote would be on Tuesday. Did he know it was off when at 11.07 this morning the Prime Minister’s spokesman said that it was definitely on? Or did he know only when the conference call with the Cabinet happened at 11.30?

Mr Speaker: I will let the Secretary of State respond, but then let us get back to the revocation of article 50.

Stephen Barclay: I will take your guidance, Mr Speaker. I think the Prime Minister covered the chronology this morning.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): In July 2016, I asked an urgent question on whether Parliament’s agreement was needed to trigger article 50 and the Minister did not know the answer. After everything that has happened, is the Secretary of State saying today that he does not know whether the decision to revoke article 50 is purely for the Executive or for Parliament?

Stephen Barclay: No, it is quite the opposite. What I am saying is that we have a very clear Government policy, which is that we will not revoke. We are absolutely clear on that and is where the Government stand.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Secretary of State aware of the case of Wilson and others v. the Prime Minister currently in the High Court, which argues that the EU withdrawal Act empowers the Prime Minister to trigger article 50 based on an advisory referendum and, if that referendum is found to be legally flawed, which it was because of the leave campaign, then the advice is void, and, in the case of a general election, that would be ruled void? Therefore, will he look at that ruling, take guidance from it and, if they find in favour, revoke article 50, which they will be asking for?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure whether the case is currently in the High Court—I do not know whether I heard correctly the hon. Gentleman’s reference to court proceedings—but if that be so, the Secretary of State will want to weigh his words carefully in any response that he gives us. If there are current legal proceedings, I know that he will be cautious.

Stephen Barclay: I always take your guidance on these matters, Mr Speaker. The point of substance is that, regardless of where the court case is or is not, the Government’s policy is firm, as I have already set out.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the Minister not see the absurdity or the irony of the ruling today, which underlines the absolute sovereignty of the UK to make constitutional decisions, being debated on the same day as the Prime Minister tried to sell us a deal...
which removes sovereignty from the UK with reference to Northern Ireland? Will he return to the PM and press on her that an assurance is not satisfactory and only a legal change in the withdrawal agreement as it pertains to Northern Ireland will be acceptable?

Stephen Barclay: I know that the hon. Gentleman takes these issues very seriously and I am always happy to discuss points with him further. However, this was an hypothetical issue taken before the courts because it is not Government policy to revoke. So it has been an interesting court case but it does not, for one iota, change the intention of this Government, which is to maintain their policy of not revoking article 50.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Irrespective of one’s view on the second referendum or the people’s vote, what is at stake here is a very important constitutional principle. We are not here to debate the Government’s policy on the revocation of article 50. We are here asking the question of whether, if Parliament were to vote to revoke article 50, the Government would honour that vote. So further to the questions from my hon. Friends, can we have an answer to that question—yes or no?

Stephen Barclay: That is a question for Parliament. It is for Parliament to decide what it does or does not do. My role as a Minister is to answer on behalf of the Government. That is what I am doing and it is the Government’s clear policy—it has not changed; I say that again—that we will not revoke. The question for Opposition Members is: are they potentially going to look to revoke article 50? That is what people want to know, particularly, as the hon. Member for Vauxhall alluded to, those people who voted for a Labour manifesto that said that it would honour the referendum result.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): If the European Council unilaterally decided to say that it wanted to extend the implementation period for article 50, would the Government automatically oppose that?

Stephen Barclay: Again, we have covered this several times. The Court case dealt with the issue of revocation; it did not deal with the issue of extension. Extension requires the consent of the other EU27 countries. That is an unchanged position from the Court. It is outside the jurisdiction of this case.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): The Secretary of State keeps telling us that the Prime Minister’s deal offers certainty, but the Prime Minister has removed the opportunity for us to vote on that certainty tomorrow. He has said that he will not revoke article 50. We on the Labour Benches are opposed to no deal because we know that that is a bad deal, but will he not admit now that refusing even to countenance revoking article 50 is tantamount to holding a no-deal Brexit gun to our collective heads?

Stephen Barclay: Again, we risk straying beyond the scope of the statement, but the point is that the Prime Minister made it clear that we will have a vote, so it is delayed; it is not withdrawn.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): In the event that the House votes down the deal in the meaningful vote and there is no majority in the House for no deal, in order to deliver on the will of the House, will the Government consider suspending article 50?

Stephen Barclay: Part of the difficulty for the House of working out the will of the House is that Opposition Members keep changing their minds. [Interruption.] I am sure—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear the Secretary of State’s mind—or the contents of it—and what he wants to say.

Stephen Barclay: I am sure that it will come as a huge surprise to you, Mr Speaker, and to other Members that the hon. Gentleman himself voted to trigger article 50. Having triggered it, he now seems to want to revoke it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is the will of this House that there is a no-deal Brexit and the Government’s policy is also that, so the Secretary of State is perhaps premature in saying that it is not Government policy to revoke article 50. Surely, if faced without option, where there is only going to be a no-deal Brexit, ruling that out of hand would be supremely reckless for the Government.

Stephen Barclay: Again, the Prime Minister covered this at length. It is simply not the case that it is the Government’s policy to have a no-deal Brexit. The Government’s policy is to have a deal. That is what the Prime Minister set out in around two and a half hours of debate this afternoon and the hon. Gentleman is simply misquoting what is the Government’s policy.
Points of Order

8.16 pm

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to my questions earlier, the Secretary of State said—at least I understood him to say this—that the United Kingdom Government had taken the same position as the Commission before the Court of Justice. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) challenged him on that. I am sure that the Secretary of State has now had the opportunity to familiarise himself with the Court’s opinion, where he will see that the Council and the Commission took the position that article 50 could be revoked, but it would need the unanimous consent of the other member states. Curiously—I can say as a senior counsel that I have never seen this happen before—the British Government refused to take a position on whether article 50 could be revoked. They refused to answer the question. I am very anxious that the record be corrected as this is a decision of the highest court in the European Union. If the Secretary of State is not prepared to acknowledge that he was wrong and that I am right about this, can you, Mr Speaker, assist me in how I might put the record straight?

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State might choose to respond, and I think it quite proper that he should be able to do so.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker, what I was making clear was the similarity in position between that taken by Her Majesty’s Government and that by the Commission. Similar arguments were made by the Commission to those of the Government. Indeed the European Commission raised doubts as to whether the proceedings were admissible. That was the point that I was seeking to make to the House and I am very happy to clarify any comments if that is helpful.

Joanna Cherry rose—

Mr Speaker: Well, I will indulge this for a short period.

Joanna Cherry: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It really is very simple. If the Secretary of State looks at paragraph 38 of the Court’s judgment, he will see the position taken by the Council and the Commission. If he looks at paragraph 43, he will see that the UK Government did not take a position. Now, I know that we are in a parallel universe here at the moment, but is the Secretary of State seriously disputing what the judgment says? If not, will he simply acknowledge that I am right about this and he is wrong?

Stephen Barclay: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. As I say, there is a similarity in positions. We can all cherry-pick different bits out of the judgment in isolation. What matters is the substance of the article and the substance of this. There was a similarity in the points raised and that is what I made clear.

Mr Speaker: To the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), who effectively asked me what restitution was available to her in the event that the Secretary of State did not clarify the matter to her satisfaction—that is to say, did not issue a correction—I would simply say that on this point, we have to leave it there. It is not for me to seek to insist on a correction; that is not within the power of the Chair. Perhaps I may say, in a moderately juridical spirit as we approach the festive season, that for my own part—this view may be more widely shared by colleagues—I greatly welcome the free legal advice provided by the hon. and learned Lady, as she is a QC, not least in the light of the fact that she referred to QCs earlier and the fact that their services tend not to come cheap.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Before the Secretary of State scarpers from the Chamber—[HON. MEMBERS: “Come back!”] Under the procedures of the House, it would obviously be wrong for me to accuse the Secretary of State of deliberately misleading the House, but what are Members to do if the Secretary of State has inadvertently misled the House? I was in Luxembourg at the time of the ruling, and there was no similarity between the Government’s case and that of the European Commission. What are we supposed to do if he has inadvertently misled the House today and if he perhaps inadvertently misled Andrew Marr on “The Andrew Marr Show” on Sunday because he thought the vote was taking place on Tuesday and it is not?

Mr Speaker: I will say two things to the hon. Gentleman. First, although I understand his disappointment, not to say irritation, that the Secretary of State has not remained in the Chamber, strictly speaking, points of order are raised with the Chair. It is not a formal obligation for Ministers to remain for the duration of points of order. Whether the Secretary of State thought that points of order appertaining to him were at an end, I cannot know because I do not know what was in his mind, but the situation is that the point of order is raised with me.

Secondly, I have a sense that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West are not going to let this issue go, and I dare say it will be played out and replayed out in days to come. I think we should leave it there for now.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It may interest the House to know that while Ministers are fleeing the Front Bench, the Prime Minister has apparently left the country in the last few minutes; apparently she has gone to Berlin, Brussels and The Hague. Is this not rather strange when this House has not yet actually taken a decision as to whether to continue with the debate? Have you had any notice that the Prime Minister intends to return to this House after these visits in order to explain what she has been doing and what she has been seeking? I am told that she is seeking a political statement that the backstop is not enforceable—extraordinary.

Mr Speaker: First of all, I am not responsible for the whereabouts of the Prime Minister. It is not customary for the Prime Minister to copy me in on her travel plans and I have made no request for her to do so. Related to that, I would say that whatever the House may decide in the course of this evening, that would not carry an implication for the presence of the Prime Minister.
because there was no expectation that she would be here to take part in any vote this evening. There was only an expectation that she would otherwise have been here tomorrow. Nevertheless, the hon. Gentleman has made his point with his usual force and vigour, and we are grateful to him for that.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: Yes, I am saving the hon. Gentleman up, but we look forward to his constitutional exegesis with due anticipation.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Has the Prime Minister given you any indication as to whether she will be back in time to face this House at Prime Minister’s questions on Wednesday? By the sound of things, she has a pretty arduous itinerary for just one day.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): She went to Argentina for eight hours.

Hon. Members: Oooh!

Mr Speaker: Order. I am grateful to the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for his point of order. I have received no intelligence about arrangements for Wednesday, but I have no reason to suppose the Prime Minister will not be here. I dare say the hon. Gentleman will receive knowledge of the situation in due course. I think we should leave it there.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Given the events of today, I wonder whether you could guide the House on if and when, in the absence of the vote that was scheduled for tomorrow night, the Government have to come back to put a meaningful vote before the House; or are there mechanisms by which they may try to avoid doing so, given the mood that has been expressed in this House over the past week or so?

Mr Speaker: It is up to the Government when to arrange for the debate and the vote. If votes that would flow from it, but the fact that it is incumbent upon the Government to come forward with a new date is very clear. That cannot be gainsaid. It has been made very clear from the Treasury Bench on several occasions—I will not say innumerable, but they are innumerable for me now because I do not know exactly how many there were. The Leader of the House has made clear repeatedly in response to questions that the debate, and the vote or votes flowing therefrom, would be rescheduled as soon as the Government felt that they were in a position, as they see it, beneficially to update the House. There is therefore no reason to suppose that that debate and votes flowing from it will not take place and every reason to believe that that debate and votes flowing from it will take place. It would be literally unconscionable if there were any thought to the contrary.

Several hon. Members rose—

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): Oh, come on.

Mr Speaker: I am sick of people saying, “Oh, come on.” These are points of order, of which the Chair must treat. Members must choose whether they wish to raise points of order. If they do, the Chair must respond. These are, if I may say so, somewhat unusual circumstances, so it is not entirely surprising that Members wish to raise points of order.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker—and this might actually be a point of order. In the business statement earlier, the Leader of the House referred several times to “resuming” the debate. Now, if the Prime Minister comes back with any amendments to the agreement, will it constitute a new debate? Some of us have contributed to the previous debate and, given that the Prime Minister said that our contributions were so influential, we would like to contribute again to the new debate.

Mr Speaker: As far as I am concerned, the answer is that it depends on what is brought back to this House. If what is brought back to this House is a new agreement and framework document, the expectation would be that a new motion would be required. Flowing from that, effectively a new debate would need to take place. If, on the other hand, what comes back is different from what I have just said—and, in a sense, less than what I have just signalled—then that would not necessarily follow, so it depends what comes back. What I do want to say to the hon. Gentleman and to other Members who are quizzical on this front—I am very confident that there are Members on both sides of the House who take these matters extremely seriously—is that the Chair, within the powers of the Chair, will do everything possible to facilitate the fullest debate in and votes by the House. There can be no escape from that reality.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. House of Commons Twitter, under #AskTheCommons, said this afternoon:

“Now the Government has made a statement that political agreement on withdrawal agreement & future framework has been reached, the requirements for the Government to make a statement to the House by 21 Jan on ‘no deal’ has been superseded.”

If the Government now do not bring back any vote because their position unravels and we end up in a no-deal situation again, does that mean we still will not get a vote by 21 January, or has the Commons revoked that advice?

Mr Speaker: That was not advice from the House; it was a Twitter feed. Moreover, I am authoritatively advised—do not forget that I have been in the Chair since 2.30 pm, so I have not been attending to those matters—that the record has since been corrected. I believe it has been corrected, or certainly that the intention is to correct it. I have been advised that it has been corrected, so that is no longer the situation. I do not think I need to elaborate further, although if there is concern or anxiety, or even confusion, I am sure that the right hon. Lady will return to the matter tomorrow. However, the concern that I think she had, quite understandably, should now be allayed by what I have just said. It was, I think, an innocent error, but it was an error.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The agreement appears to have been initialed by the Prime Minister about 10 days ago. Am I right in
construing what you have just said as meaning that if there is a new withdrawal agreement so intialled a second time with a new signature, then effectively the contempt motion or, for that matter, with regard to the entire procedure—whether with regard to the question of section 13 and its effectiveness—is that we have to go back to square one?

Mr Speaker: Broadly speaking, the answer is yes. We would have to treat it as a discrete item that was beginning and needed to be continued and completed, and I would expect that that which had applied to the existing, but as yet by the House unapproved, agreement would be sought in respect of the new agreement. That would be the premise from which I would work.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Yvette Cooper: On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I will take the point of order from Yvette Cooper and then come to Mr Betts and Mr Bryant.

Yvette Cooper: I am grateful, Mr Speaker. As I understand it, there has been a clarification on the House of Commons Twitter feed, but it simply says:

“Further proceedings under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 are a matter of legal interpretation and not for the House to determine.”

That seems to raise huge questions about whether this House could be guaranteed a vote if the Government were to end up slipping into no deal. Given the seriousness of this, it would be very helpful to have formal clarification from you or from the Clerks.

Mr Speaker: The Clerks’ advice is that where there is a statutory issue, it would not be for the House to rule on that, and that it is not for the Chair to seek to give a ruling on that matter. In so far as the right hon. Lady is concerned about the prospects of debate on these matters in the light of evolving circumstances and the pursuit of a revised agreement, I have sought to reassure her that debates will happen, because the commitment to those debates is manifest, explicit, and, it seems to me, to all intents and purposes irrevocable. What I do not feel I can pronounce upon is matters of law. I certainly would not be in a position to do that, if I were required to do it at all, now. But in so far as the right hon. Lady and others are seeking assurance that the debates that they thought they were about to get will still be forthcoming, with votes flowing therefrom, I think I can, without fear of contradiction, give those assurances to Members, whatever their political opinion on the matter.

Yvette Cooper: So are you confirming, then, Mr Speaker, that there is no guarantee that this House would have a vote on a no-deal situation if the Government slipped into that, and that that would simply be a matter for the courts to decide rather than this House being able to ensure that it had a vote under the withdrawal agreement legislation?

Mr Speaker: I do not feel that I can rule on that now. I am certainly expecting that there will be debate and votes on that very specific and, I accept, extremely important point. I do not want to give an incorrect answer or a misleading impression, and I think it is better for me to reflect on that, and, if it would be appropriate, to come back to the right hon. Lady or to report to the House, because it is an extremely salient issue. I think that otherwise I stand by the rest of what I have said, and on that particular point I would like to take stock.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the point of order raised by the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), if there were to be any changes to the agreement and the motion, would the assumption be that this House would be entitled to see any changes to the advice that the Attorney General gives on that?

Mr Speaker: Well, that is hypothetical. That does not mean that it is not an important question, but it is hypothetical at this stage. I am not sure that I could give such an automatic assurance to the hon. Gentleman. It may be that efforts would have to be made to secure a commitment to the release, or publication, of that advice. I think there would be a strong moral basis for expecting that that advice would be published, in the light—

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I am very heartened to see a former Director of Public Prosecutions nodding vigorously in assent to my proposition, considering that he is a distinguished lawyer and I am not. There is a strong moral basis for believing that that to which the Government eventually acceded last week would be something to which they would accede in the new circumstances, especially as the new circumstances were the result of failure to reach agreement on the earlier proposals and their own actions thereafter.

Chris Bryant: It may not be worth waiting for after all that, Mr Speaker, but on a point of order. You said earlier that you thought that it would be better and more courteous to the House if there was a proper process of preventing the debate later tonight and tomorrow, and preventing the vote. I get that the mood in the House today has been that it would prefer the Government to proceed with the debate today and tomorrow, and that if they are not going to, then at least we should be allowed to vote on whether we are voting or not. As I understand it, what the Government are intending to do is that when it comes to the Orders of the Day, when you say “What day?”, one of the Whips will shout “Tomorrow”—which here does not really mean tomorrow but some other day as yet unspecified. It is within the gift of the Government, if they wanted to, to allow any Member of the House to move the Orders of the Day, because that can be moved by any Member of the House, as was decided in decisions of the House in 1860, 1886, 1907 and 1908, and on many other occasions. I just wonder, if many Members of the House were to shout today, would you not be well advised to take one of them rather than the Whip?
Mr Speaker: If they are not Ministers, I am not in a position to do so. If the Government themselves were content for another Member to shout “Now” and for the debate to take place, that debate could take place. However, I must say to the hon. Gentleman that over the last five hours or so—just under five hours—since the Prime Minister’s initial statement, the Leader of the Opposition’s reply and her reply to him were completed, I have had no indication from the Government that they are minded to adopt the approach that I thought would be preferable and more popular with the House—namely, putting the Question on a motion that the House should adjourn and allowing it to be voted upon. Given that the Government have not done that, which they could do, and just accept the democratic will of the House, it seems rather improbable that they would want to share their privilege in respect of moving an Order of the Day. They know that they have the exclusive right to move an Order of the Day in relation to their own business, so I cannot see that they are likely to indicate otherwise.

This whole proceeding has been extremely regrettable—that is manifest; it is palpable and uncontroversial. This is not the way that the business of the House is ordinarily conducted. It is a most unfortunate state of affairs, but we must all act within our powers and not ultra vires. I have sought to do everything I can for nearly nine and a half years, and I will go on doing so, to support the House and Back Benchers in particular, holding ministerial feet to the fire as necessary, but I have to operate within the powers that I have, not those that some Members perhaps would like me to have.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was in the Chamber earlier when you wisely set out the two options available to Her Majesty’s Government on how they could postpone a debate. One can only presume, from earlier interventions, that they have chosen one of those two options. Can you confirm my understanding of what you said earlier—that both options available to the Government were in order and therefore that whichever route the Government decide to take will not be disorderly?

Mr Speaker: Nobody suggested that anything was disorderly. I do not want to be kind to the hon. Gentleman—[HON. MEMBERS: “Go on!”] No, I do not want to be kind to him. I have known him for probably 30 years, and he is a very dedicated public servant, so I certainly do not wish to be kind to him, but it is rather a red herring that he is raising. Nobody has suggested that there was anything disorderly. I am merely suggesting that this is a most unusual circumstance, and I am not aware of any precedent for the handling of a matter of this magnitude in this way.

Reference was made earlier to how relatively frequently Ministers choose not to proceed with the business, and a Whip on duty will say, “Not moved.” It is perfectly true that that happens relatively frequently. It certainly does not happen frequently and has not happened in my memory at all in relation to a matter of this magnitude, in respect of which a business of the House motion was passed six days previously. That is my point. It is a simple point. I think it is a powerful point, and I am certain it is a point that the hon. Gentleman will grasp.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You are right that these are probably unique circumstances. I certainly have moved a motion from the Back Benches that the Government have not chosen to move, and we have proceeded to debate and vote on it, so that clearly can be done. I understand your point about this being Government business, but did that argument not fall when the business of the House motion was passed and it became the business of the House? It is no longer for Government to decide; it is for the House to decide.

Standing Order No. 46 on page 45 certainly gives you discretion in relation to suspension of debate. I was going to shout “Now”, but unfortunately the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) spoiled my fun by putting that suggestion on the record. It seems to me that there is some discretion in these unique circumstances, and it is clear from the tone of the House that it is very unhappy with the way the Government are proceeding.

Mr Speaker: It is clear that there is much unhappiness. It is important that we be accurate about these matters. I am afraid that I cannot take an instruction to the House in relation to a Government Order of the Day from other than a Government Minister. The hon. Gentleman will know, from his extensive experience as a Member in charge of a veritable raft of private Members’ Bills, that it is, in those circumstances, for him and him alone to decide whether to proceed with or defer an Order of the Day where he is in charge.

I know what the hon. Gentleman has said, and I have explored all this with the Clerk of the House many a time and oft over the last 48 hours. In this instance, even though the business of the House motion was agreed by the House, the Order is the property of the Government, and it is therefore for the Government to decide whether or not to move the business. If Members find that unsatisfactory, it is perfectly open for Members to change the procedures of the House, but I cannot change them on the hoof.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You have rightly said that today has been an exceptional day. I can certainly confirm that, in 21 years as a Member of Parliament, I have never experienced a day of this nature. Clearly, this is the sort of day on which a motion of no confidence in the Government should be moved. Can you help me, Mr Speaker? Is an Opposition party that is not the official Opposition in a position to move such a motion of no confidence?

Mr Speaker: It is open to a representative of a party other than the principal Opposition to table such a motion. The ordinary working assumption is that such a motion is taken if it is proffered by the official Opposition. I will leave it there for now. I am not saying whether this is desirable or undesirable. I am the custodian of the rights of the House and of the rigorous application of correct procedure. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman, who is a former Deputy Leader of the House, readily acknowledges that. I will not duck my duty—I did not duck my duty on the contempt motion, and would not in comparable circumstances again—but I come back to the point that one has to operate within one’s powers.
Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Anybody observing these proceedings today would say that you have played a blinder in trying to get this House to demonstrate what it wants and to say exactly what is happening with this meaningful vote. It looks likely—it is almost certain—that the Government will have their say, which means that we will not be able to vote on their cancelling this meaningful vote, but I wonder whether we may have an indicative vote of this House. When the Order of the Day is read and the Whip responds, if enough of us shout “Now” while Government Members shout “Tomorrow”, would that express the indication of this House, and how would we get that formally recognised?

Mr Speaker: I have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said—he is an experienced parliamentarian and a passionate one—and I would say to him that we rule in this place by rules, not by shouting. That said, I have periodically over the years exhorted the hon. Gentleman not to shout, and on the whole my efforts to that end have been spectacularly unsuccessful. I have no reason to expect that if I were to exhort Members not to shout when they are minded to do so this evening, I should be any more successful. The hon. Gentleman and other Members will do what they wish to do at the appropriate moment.

Exiting the European Union: Meaningful Vote

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker: In a moment, I will call the Leader of the Opposition to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. He has up to three minutes in which to make such an application. I call Mr Jeremy Corbyn.

8.47 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I wish to apply for an emergency debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration: the Prime Minister’s unprecedented decision not to proceed with the final two days of debate and the meaningful vote, despite the House’s order of Tuesday 4 December 2018; her failure to allow this House to express its view on the Government’s deal or her proposed negotiating objectives; and her doing so without the agreement of this House.

I recognise that, under Standing Order 24, this should be a specific and important matter, and I will very briefly set out my reasons for this debate. On Tuesday 4 December, the House unanimously agreed a business motion that sets out the rules and timetable governing the meaningful vote debate. The Prime Minister has today unilaterally announced that she will “defer the vote scheduled for tomorrow, and will not proceed to divide the House at this time.”

Neither the Prime Minister nor the Leader of the House has confirmed the date for the conclusion of the debate or the votes. This shows a disregard for Parliament and the rights of the House, as well as of the 164 Members who have spoken in the debate and those who are planning to do so. Once again, the decisions of Parliament are being ignored. It is clear, as the Prime Minister admitted in her statement, that she has decided to avoid a heavy defeat on her deal in the House of Commons tomorrow. Again, Parliament is being given no opportunity to express its view on her negotiation.

As you set out from the Chair, there are two options available to the Government to alter the business. The first and infinitely preferable option is for a Minister to propose moving the Adjournment so that the House has an opportunity to vote on this proposition. The second is that the Government Whips do not move the meaningful vote debate for today. It cannot be right that the Government can unilaterally alter the arrangements once this House has agreed on a timetable without the House being given the opportunity to express its will.

The public will look at the behaviour of this Government and how they treat their democratically elected representatives with despair. Our constitution works on the basis that Governments control the business of the House because they have a majority in the House. The Government appear to be avoiding a vote on a change of business because they fear that they do not command a majority. We have no indication when the debate will be resumed or completed; neither does it seem reasonable that the Government will wait until Thursday before confirming the business of the final sitting week before Christmas. The Government have
failed to confirm whether they will bring forward the implementation Bill next week.

Finally, it is vital that the Government treat Parliament with—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members can shout as much as they like. I will be the judge of when the speech is completed and I will put the application to the House. This is being done at short notice, and it does not serve the interests of the House for Members to shout their heads off from a sedentary position. If they want to do so, so be it, but it will not make the slightest difference to the procedure that we follow.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I was actually just coming to a conclusion.

The Government's incompetence cannot be used as an excuse to threaten the country with no deal. It is vital that the Government treat Parliament with respect, honour the terms of the original business of the House that the Government treat Parliament with respect, and the Whips will be willing to move, and we are deeply obliged to him for that.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I have listened carefully to the application from him. I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed—[Interruption]—it is absolutely proper—under Standing Order No. 24. The assumption must be that the right hon. Gentleman is supported by Members, but if Members wish to stand in their place to indicate such, it is up to them to do so.

Application agreed to.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman has obtained the leave of the House. Members should now resume their seats. Strictly speaking, there is no requirement for Members to stand. It is up to somebody to object, and nobody did object, so the right hon. Gentleman had secured his debate anyway, but the display of support makes it very clear that it is a widely held view in the House.

The right hon. Gentleman has obtained the leave of the House. The debate will be held tomorrow as the first item of public business. The debate will last for up to three hours and it will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the right hon. Gentleman's application.

European Union (Withdrawal) Act
[4TH ALLOTED DAY]
Resumption of adjourned debate on Question (4 December 2018).

That this House approves for the purposes of section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the negotiated withdrawal agreement laid before the House on Monday 26 November 2018 with the title 'Agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland from the European Union and the European Atomic Energy Community' and the framework for the future relationship laid before the House on Monday 26 November 2018 with the title 'Political Declaration setting out the framework for the future relationship between the European Union and the United Kingdom'.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Now.

The Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household (Mark Spencer): Tomorrow.

Hon. Members: Now.

Mr Speaker: As I explained, I am governed by the rules. The order is in the possession of the Government. The Whips on duty are sitting saying absolutely nothing, as tends to be the case on these occasions, and the Whip who has said something has said something that is unpopular with a lot of other Members, but that he is empowered to say. Colleagues have registered their view on the matter. [Interruption.]

Debate to be resumed tomorrow.

Mr Speaker: Order. Put it back. [Interruption.] I am grateful to a dedicated servant of the House for bringing forward the Mace and restoring it to its place. I am sorry, but under the power given to me by Standing Order No. 43—I think the hon. Gentleman will know the implications of his action—I must order the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle) to withdraw immediately from the House for the remainder of this day's sitting. Mr Russell-Moyle, please leave the Chamber. Thank you. I am grateful. [Interruption.] He must leave or he will be escorted. He should leave. I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman for complying with my instruction.

The Speaker ordered Mr Russell-Moyle, member for Brighton, Kemptown, to withdraw immediately from the House during the remainder of the day's sitting (Standing Order No. 43) and the Member withdrew accordingly.

Mr Speaker: We come now to motion no. 2 on Exiting the European Union (Competition). Not moved.

We come now to the presentation of a public petition. [Interruption.] I gather Mr Patrick Grady has withdrawn his notice of intention to present his petition.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I find it quite extraordinary that very large numbers of—Mr Howarth! A statesmanlike figure like you stretching your arms in a moderately eccentric manner. I find it quite extraordinary that Members are apparently leaving the Chamber before the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) has aired the important issue on the Adjournment of tram safety, to which I hoped there would be a full and attentive House. If Members—I am playing for time—insist on leaving the Chamber at this point I should be most obliged to them, and I know the hon. Lady would, if they were to do so quickly and quietly so that we can proceed.

We come now to something that I think the Whip on duty will be willing to move, and we are deeply obliged to him for that.

Order. Put it back.
Tram Safety

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

8.57 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I rise to speak slightly earlier than I had anticipated. These are momentous days, but at 6.7 am on 9 November 2016 a far more momentous tragedy occurred, one that would change a community forever, one that would bring horror to the lives of many and one that took the lives of our loved ones. Seven families will never be the same. In one tragic moment, the Croydon tram crash ripped away fathers, sons, mothers and daughters: Dane Chinnery, Donald Collett, Robert Huxley, Phil Logan, Dorota Rynkiewicz, Phil Seary and Mark Smith. Their friends and family members join us in the Gallery this evening. The tram crash at Sandilands junction in my constituency was the worst tram accident in a century. It was the worst rail tragedy for 17 years. Along with those who died, 62 people were injured, several with life-changing injuries.

I want to be clear at the outset of this debate that there is an ongoing criminal investigation into the Croydon tram crash and a coroner’s investigation. It would not be appropriate for me or other colleagues to pre-empt the findings of those investigations by commenting today on the possible causes of the crash or who was to blame. What we know is that a tragedy like this cannot be allowed to happen again on our tram networks. There should have been a wake-up call, and we know what needs to happen. Almost exactly a year ago on 7 December 2017, the Rail Accident Investigation Branch—RAIB—published a detailed 180-page report into the crash, which made a series of important recommendations to improve tram safety across the country’s tram networks in the future.

On that same day a year ago, I asked a question to the Leader of the House about when the Department for Transport would come to the House to make a full statement on how the Government would ensure that the RAIB recommendations were implemented as swiftly as possible. In the year since, no Minister has come to the House to update us on tram safety. Not a single written ministerial statement has been made. In fact, not a single Minister has made a statement in this place on the Croydon tram crash since 14 November 2016, two years ago.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter to the House for our consideration. The fact that nothing has been done, as she outlined, is very worrying. Does she agree that the lessons that need to be learned from the Sandilands train crash cannot be learned without vital funding and that that is a key factor, as well as safety? It must never come to further loss of life before the Government—

I say this with respect for the Minister—step up to the mark and do the right thing.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I agree, and I will come on to what has been done and what is yet to be done.

This is not just an issue for Croydon: it is a national issue. There were 267 million tram and light rail journeys made last year. Clearly, the industry, the regulator and local transport bodies have a responsibility to deliver the improvements that we need. I have met the Office of Rail and Road, the deputy Mayor of London, Transport for London and others, and I am grateful to TfL executives for meeting me and families of the victims today in Parliament. But there is also a responsibility on central Government; the ultimate responsibility for people’s safety stops with them.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and for raising this very important issue in the House today. She will know, as I do—as a fellow Croydon Member of Parliament—of the high levels of public concern and anxiety about the Government’s failure to act on the recommendations. There has been another speeding tram incident since the fatalities at Sandilands and another crash involving a bus. We really need to know what the Government intend to do and what lessons they intend to implement—having listened to what went wrong—to keep people safe and reassure them that they are always safe on public transport.

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. He is absolutely right. That has to be on all of us, and we need to make sure that the Government are doing what they can.

The Department for Transport has a duty to ensure that work is being done and to keep Parliament updated on progress. The silence in this place over the last year suggests that the Government have not been as active as they should have been. In fact, a month ago, I learned that they were actively delaying RAIB’s core recommendation—the creation of a new UK tram safety body—because they were failing to release the required funding. If this new body, currently operating in a basic “shadow” form, does not receive the required funding by the end of the year, it will cease to function at all. Other recommendations, which I will come to, have also not seen enough progress, in part because this body is not in place.

Families of the victims are frustrated. All of us are frustrated and all of us are touched by that terrible tragedy. I wrote to the Secretary of State about this and I asked again in the House two weeks ago for a statement or a debate in Government time. Yet again, there was silence from Government. We deserve better than this, so I hope that this evening, the Minister can tell me why the Government have yet to confirm the funding for a new tram safety body; when the funding will be signed off by his Department; and crucially, what actions the Government are taking to ensure that the remaining RAIB recommendations are delivered as soon as possible.

Tramways have a proud history in the UK. In the early 1900s, tram networks stretched the length and breadth of the land, connecting not just our cities, but towns large and small. There were 14,000 trams in 1927, and London alone had 30 tram routes across the city. The majority of those were lost in post-war redevelopment, but tram networks still connect eight of our greatest cities and regions: London, Greater Manchester, the west midlands, Edinburgh, Sheffield, Nottingham, Blackpool and Newcastle. Trams create no pollution, are fully accessible and have greater capacity and better punctuality than buses. Trams connect our communities and are conduits for local growth.

When the Tramlink was introduced in Croydon, it brought our community closer together and made a particular difference in New Addington in the south of
my constituency. It helped to attract inward investment into Croydon and offered residents the mobility to find jobs across the borough. But when a tragedy of this significance occurs, it shakes people’s confidence in tram networks. The number of tram and light rail passenger journeys across England fell by 0.2% last year—the first drop in almost a decade. Over half of all tram and light rail journeys last year happened in London, where the number of journeys dropped by the bigger margin of 2.1%, while the number of London Tramlink journeys fell by 400,000 to 29.1 million. If that is in any part due to a loss of confidence, we must rebuild that trust, and that starts with showing clear and decisive action on tram safety.

RAIB carried out a 13-month investigation into the Croydon tram crash, and I thank it for its comprehensive work. The RAIB report comes to its own conclusions about the possible causes of the crash, which I will not mention because of the ongoing investigations. Looking to the future, the report makes 15 important recommendations to prevent such a tragedy from happening again. In the year since then, we should have heard from Ministers about how the different agencies, organisations and operators are progressing with their respective responsibilities. I sincerely hope that the Minister can deliver a comprehensive update to the House tonight.

The majority of the 15 recommendations are yet to be fully implemented. The first and foremost of them was to set up a dedicated UK-wide tram safety body to drive improvements across the UK’s tram networks. It is likely that many of the subsequent recommendations on national tram safety cannot be fully implemented without this new body, so it really is a failure that one year on we are still waiting. I understand that the Government funding for the body will be split between the Government and industry. The industry has already allocated its funding and a shadow board has been in place and ready to get to work for months, yet as of last month the funding from Government had still not been signed off. I wrote to the Secretary of State about this over a month ago, and I am yet to receive a reply.

The Department for Transport has, however, given a statement to the media stating that “final decisions are being made on funding for the Light Rail Safety Board.”

I understand that if full funding is not confirmed by the Government by the end of this year, even the limited work the board is doing in shadow form will cease. Can the Minister therefore confirm whether that funding decision has been made? If it has not, can he explain to me and to the families here today why the Government are delaying?

Recommendation 2 requires tram operators, owners and infrastructure managers to “jointly conduct a systematic review of operational risks and control measures associated with the design, maintenance and operation of tramways” and to “publish updated guidance”. That updated guidance has yet to be published. I understand the new light rail safety standards board will be responsible for publishing this, but it does not yet exist. Can the Minister can give us a timetable for the publication of this guidance?

Recommendations 3 to 5 involve changes to trams and tramways to significantly reduce the risk of future accidents. Those changes are very important and include installation of automatic braking systems; technology to monitor the attention state of drivers; and improved signage, lighting and information for drivers. Automatic braking systems have not yet been installed on any tram system. TfL has confirmed that it plans to fully implement a system by next December—more than three years after the crash.

I understand that this is complicated work, that TfL has confirmed that it will award a contract to start it very shortly and that many other operators will look to the work TfL is doing before making a decision on implementing their own systems, but three years feels too long for those of us worried about safety now. I wonder whether the Government could be doing more to work with TfL to prioritise this important work. TfL and Tram Operations Ltd have successfully implemented a guardian device on London Tramlink that can monitor the attention state of drivers and help with fatigue management, but it is unclear whether it has been picked up across other tram networks.

The recommendation on signage and lighting again appears to have been on partially implemented and with a lack of consistency. TfL has implemented a new lower speed limit on the London network, with new restrictions at certain sites such as Sandilands and new junctions, and will be introducing a new system called iTram, which gives in-cab alerts, but again the iTram system will reportedly not be in place until December 2019—more than three years after the crash. Moreover, there is a lack of clarity about whether the speed restrictions or the iTram system will be consistent across the industry, and whether they will be required or optional. In all those areas, progress seems to be too slow and too inconsistent across the country, which, again, may be a sign of a lack of co-ordination owing to the lack of a UK-wide co-ordinating body.

Recommendations 6, 7 and 8 relate to greater protections for passengers and means of escape should a tram have an accident. Understandably and obviously, the families of those who died are frustrated about the difference between the current requirements for the strength of tram windows for side-facing windows and front windscreens. The side windows are required to be the same strength as those of passenger-carrying vehicles on roads, but the front windows are required to be stronger, with shatterproof safety laminated glass—the type required for trains. Recommendation 6 seeks to improve the strength, but, again, there are yet to be changes across the sector. Other tram networks appear to be waiting for TfL, which has been undertaking testing. Last month the Mayor of London said that work to strengthen the windows was due to start shortly, and would be completed by March 2019.

The process is complex. The weight of the stronger glass has clear implications for the ability of trams to go around corners safely. The last thing we want to do is make the glass stronger but, in doing so, increase the risk of another derailment. Nevertheless, I feel that more progress could have been made on window strength, because that would have demonstrated to passengers that clear action had been taken to keep them safe. Two years after the accident, we still do not know when the recommendation will be delivered for tram networks outside London.
Recommendations 7 and 8 relate to emergency lighting and improved evacuation for overturned trams. TfL has issued a tender for improved emergency lighting, while other tram networks seem to be waiting for the creation of the national light rail safety board before acting. The work on evacuation is being led by UK Tram, but it appears that no clear solution has been identified, and it seems unlikely that that recommendation will be implemented at all.

Recommendation 9 requires the Office of Rail and Road to carry out a review of the regulatory framework for trams, which I understand is in progress. It sets out options and recommendations for changes in the regulation of the sector in June. They include options for certification schemes, which could be mandatory or voluntary. The ORR says that it “would not resist the introduction of mandatory or voluntary certification schemes if demanded by Ministers and/or the sector”. Perhaps the Minister could update us on his conversations with the ORR about certification. The ORR says that a certification scheme would give it stronger regulatory levers to press for implementation of the Sandilands recommendations. Given the lack of progress and the lack of consistency across the UK tram networks in respect of those recommendations, that might be an advisable course of action for the Government to take.

The final six recommendations are aimed at TfL and Tram Operations Limited, and have specific implications for the London Tramlink network. They seek a marked improvement in the safety culture in London trams, including better mechanisms for driver fatigue management, improved CCTV, operational expertise, and the reporting and resolving of concerns. Several of them, including recommendations 10, 13 and 14, have already been implemented; the implementation of others is still in progress, and is the subject of ongoing reviews. They include a detailed review of fatigue risk management, in respect of which some improvements have already been made, but the full programme is not yet complete.

Mr Reed: My hon. Friend is reminding us powerfully of the important recommendations that were made in the aftermath of the crash. I recall being in the Chamber in the days following it, and hearing the Minister speak, in my view, convincingly and well about how the Government would learn the lessons and take action. May I invite my hon. Friend to speculate on why, a year after receiving the recommendations, the Government have done absolutely nothing to follow them up?

Sarah Jones: I struggle to understand why more has not been done, and I wonder why this has not been a top priority for the Government. In the last year the Department for Transport has had to deal with many other issues that may have been subject to more attention and focus, but I nevertheless think it a great shame that more has not been done.

Two years on from the tram crash there is one clear fact that should motivate all of us: trams across the country are still without a consistent level of safety to avoid a repeat of the tram crash. There is still no consistent means by which to monitor and manage driver fatigue. If a tram is going too fast there is still not an automatic braking system. If a tram overturns the windows are not yet consistently shatterproof along the sides of the vehicle. Most importantly, the body to co-ordinate and deliver safety improvements is still not in place. The Government could act upon that right now, and I urge the Minister to do so. I also urge him to work with Transport for London, the Office of Rail and Road and the rest of the industry to make sure the host of outstanding safety recommendations—as many as 11 still outstanding—are delivered upon as soon as possible.

The Government can drive this process forward; we just need the political will. We want something good to come from that dreadful day on 9 November 2016. The victims, their families and all tram passengers across the UK deserve nothing less.

9.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Jesse Norman): I congratulate the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) on securing this important debate, and I know the whole House would wish to join me in offering our condolences to the families and friends of all who lost their lives or were injured, many of them very seriously, in the tram crash of November 2016. It has been suggested that the Government have not been active and energetic on this issue, and I am happy to respond in detail to rebut those suggestions. Let me remind the House of the incident and describe the follow-up actions we have taken.

On Wednesday 9 November 2016, the London Tramlink tram No. 2551 travelling from New Addington towards East Croydon overturned on the approach to Sandilands tram stop on a curved track that has a permanent speed restriction of 20 kph. The tram at that time was travelling at approximately 73 kph. Of the 70 people on board, seven lost their lives and 62 people were injured, 19 of them seriously. Following this tragic accident, the Rail Accident Investigation Branch undertook an investigation, as is normal practice in these types of incidents. RAIB is independent and its investigation and report do not apportion blame or liability. Its sole purpose is to ensure lessons are recorded and learned in order to improve safety and prevent future such accidents occurring.

RAIB published its report into the tram-overturning incident at Sandilands on 7 December 2017. Its investigation identified that the immediate cause of the tram overturning was that it was travelling too fast to negotiate the curve, and the causal factors for that were that the tram did not slow down to a safe speed before entering Sandilands south curve because the driver did not apply sufficient braking. RAIB’s report states that, although some doubt remains as to the reasons for the driver not applying sufficient braking, RAIB concluded that the most likely cause was a temporary loss of awareness of driving task due to a period of low workload. It is also possible that, when regaining awareness, the driver became confused about his location and direction of travel. RAIB found no evidence that the driver’s health or medical fitness contributed to what happened, but stated that, although highly unlikely, an undetected medical reason cannot be discounted. Of course, as the hon. Lady made clear, further investigations are continuing and I know the House will understand that it would not be appropriate to say anything further on this issue.

The RAIB investigation did, however, find that the risk of trams overturning on curves was not properly understood and so there were insufficient safety measures in place. It also found that many of the fatalities and serious injuries were as a result of falling through the windows or doors as the tram overturned.

11 still outstanding—are delivered upon as soon as possible.

The Government can drive this process forward; we just need the political will. We want something good to come from that dreadful day on 9 November 2016. The victims, their families and all tram passengers across the UK deserve nothing less.
As the hon. Lady made clear, the RAIB report made 15 recommendations to help to improve safety on UK trams. These recommendations relate to action in five main areas: the need for modern technology to intervene when trams approach hazardous features too fast or when drivers lose awareness of their driving; the need for operators to promote better awareness and management of the risk associated with tramway operations; the need for work to reduce the extent of injuries caused to passengers in serious tram accidents and to make it easier for them to escape; the need for improvements to safety management systems, particularly to encourage a culture in which everyone feels able to report mistakes, including their own; and the need for greater collaboration across the tramway industry on matters relating to safety.

That is why one of the main recommendations in the RAIB’s report was for the Office of Rail and Road to work with the UK tram industry to develop a body to enable more effective UK-wide co-operation, in what is inevitably a varied sector, on matters related to safety and on the development of common standards and good practice guidance. UK Tram, which is the voice of the light rail sector, and the Office of Rail and Road called a meeting of the industry in London last year at which it was agreed to establish an independent review group to consider the RAIB recommendation regarding setting up such an industry body to be responsible for ensuring better co-operation on light rail safety and standards.

At a further meeting held in Manchester in January this year, the Department for Transport, the Office of Rail and Road, tram system owners, operators and infrastructure managers convened to discuss the way forward and how the sector as a whole could take responsibility for and ownership of proceeding with the recommendations arising from the RAIB report. At that meeting, the independent review group reported its proposals for a light rail safety and standards board to be formed. The review group also proposed that there was a need properly to scope the new organisation and its function, structure and budget, particularly with regard to funding.

The board has now been created to provide expert support to the light rail industry in this country and to take forward sustainable improvements in the safety and efficiency of tramways and light rail systems. It will also oversee the work to undertake the recommendations from the RAIB report, and its primary functions will include risk analysis, informing industry decisions and sharing best practice; codification and development of standards and guidance; establishing relationships with other light rail jurisdictions around the world; light rail innovation and research; collaboration with other industry safety bodies; safety, accident and near miss reporting, collation and analysis; reviewing industry dissemination of information and lessons learned; and oversight of competent persons and accreditation.

The hon. Lady suggests that the Department for Transport has not provided funding or been active in ensuring that the recommendations from the RAIB report have been implemented, but let me assure the House that that is not the case. While the board was being set up, the Department allocated £250,000 to UK Tram in July this year as an interim payment to ensure that progress on working through the recommendations could begin quickly. I am pleased to report to the House that work on the recommendations is being taken forward by the sector. The light rail safety and standards board steering group has now developed a business plan setting out the functions of the full board. A board of directors has been elected and a chief executive officer has been appointed. The Department received a further funding proposal from the board in late October—that is, five or six weeks ago—and I am pleased to say that we are looking closely at this request and I expect to make an announcement shortly.

Meanwhile, a range of other work is under way. UK Tram has defined a programme to develop a light rail risk analysis model that can be applied to all UK tramway systems and, where appropriate, to other light rail systems. UK Tram has let a contract with consultants after the steering group agreed the terms of reference for this project, and work has now commenced on the development of this risk model. UK Tram has also reviewed the availability of technical devices for automatically monitoring and/or controlling the speed of a tram on the approach to junctions and other key locations. We expect a full report to be published by UK Tram next week. Building on work undertaken by Transport for London, UK Tram has reviewed the availability of driver vigilance devices—also named driver inattention devices—which could monitor the alertness of a driver and detect when they are likely to lose concentration. Again, a full report is due to be published for UK Tram members next week. I am also pleased to inform the House that all tramway operators in the United Kingdom have reviewed all bends and curves on their systems and introduced countdown speed restrictions and chevron signs on the approaches, where required.

In order to identify means of improving the passenger containment provided by tram windows and doors, UK Tram and the operators have been in discussions with manufacturers to see whether improvements can be made. The information that they have gathered so far indicates that laminated windows could be fitted—albeit, as the hon. Lady has mentioned, at extra cost and, more problematically, extra weight—to new vehicles. For current tram fleets, fitting a protective film to the windows would help to reduce risk.

Regarding doors, most UK tramway systems have more modern vehicles with doors that have fully welded construction, which offers far more structural integrity and should aid containment in the context of a crash. Operators have also reviewed their emergency lighting, and suppliers have been able to offer a cut-off switch that is covered and not exposed in the event of an impact. Most suppliers stated that they could also offer as an option internal lighting with integral energy storage in the lighting units, if required. Progress is being made on the recommendations from the RAIB report.

This is an important issue at an important moment. Light rail is popular, as can be seen from the statistics: more than 267 million passenger journeys were made on the eight light rail and tram systems in England in 2017-18. The sector prides itself on being one of the safest modes of public transport, and it strives to maintain high standards in safety. The safety record speaks for itself.
Until this accident occurred in 2016, no passenger had been killed on a tram since January 1959. The Government are committed to ensuring that industry and the regulator apply the lessons that have been learned so that a tragedy of this kind can never happen again.

Question put and agreed to.

9.26 pm

House adjourned.
Robert Jenrick: That was very tenuous. Once a new stadium has been built in Truro, perhaps people will not need to go to Plymouth to support Argyle. We are supporting grassroots sports in several ways—for example, the soft drinks industry levy has ensured that more than £500 million of additional funding has gone into school sport and into the health and wellbeing schemes that are delivered, along with breakfast clubs, in our primary schools.

**Support for the High Street**

2. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the high street.

Robert Jenrick: That was very tenuous. Once a new stadium has been built in Truro, perhaps people will not need to go to Plymouth to support Argyle. We are supporting grassroots sports in several ways—for example, the soft drinks industry levy has ensured that more than £500 million of additional funding has gone into school sport and into the health and wellbeing schemes that are delivered, along with breakfast clubs, in our primary schools.

**Support for the High Street**

2. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What fiscal steps he is taking to support the high street.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Budget 2018 announced our plan for the high street, which provides £1.5 billion of support to fund local areas as they make their high streets fit for the future. The plan includes a £675 million future high streets fund, planning reforms, a high streets taskforce, support for community assets and a cut by a third to the business rates bills of independent retailers for two years from April 2019, saving businesses almost £900 million.

Maria Caulfield: Although I welcome the measures that the Chancellor just mentioned—they are helping high streets greatly—the business rates system is currently not working for high streets. Will the Chancellor therefore consider a type of transaction tax that would level the playing field between online businesses and those based on premises, and also enable businesses such as Starbucks and Amazon to start to pay their fair share of tax?

Mr Hammond: My hon. Friend makes a point that has been raised on many occasions. There is concern about the way the business rates system works. In 2016, we conducted a fundamental review of business rates that agreed that property-based taxes were easy to collect, difficult to avoid and stable. There was no consensus around any replacement for business rates. My hon. Friend will know that separately the Government announced in the Budget a digital services tax to ensure that digital businesses pay tax that reflects the value that they derive from UK users.

Peter Heaton-Jones: Will the Chancellor join me in congratulating Barnstaple, where the high street has bucked the national trend? We have fewer vacant premises and increasing footfall. Will the Government continue to support retailers, especially the smaller independent businesses that are the backbone of our economy?

Mr Hammond: Yes, I am happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating Barnstaple on the success of its high street. Of course, there are many successful high streets throughout the United Kingdom, even at a time when the high street overall is under pressure. I am sure my hon. Friend is aware that Devon’s success does not stop at the high street; it has seen a wider economic achievement, with unemployment across Devon down by no less than 57% since 2010 and down by 25% over the past year.
Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): A buoyant high street is absolutely vital for communities such as mine in Batley and Spen. The Treasury Committee report released today suggests that northern towns are more exposed to Brexit trade-related risks than others. With that in mind, will the Minister tell us what has been put in place to support communities such as mine that will be hardest hit post Brexit?

Mr Hammond: The answer, of course, is to ensure that we leave the European Union in a way that supports our economy across the United Kingdom. That means a negotiated deal that allows us to have a smooth exit and retain a close trading partnership with our European neighbours in the future.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Some 51,000 shops on the UK’s high streets closed in the past year. Local businesses in even successful places such as Kendal and Windermere struggle because they are forced to pay huge taxes while mega-online retailers get away with paying next to no tax at all. Will the Chancellor give a well-deserved Christmas present to the high street by halving business rates there paid for by taxing internet firms on the basis of their turnover, not just their profits?

Mr Hammond: I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman was in his place for the Budget, but I did in fact announce a digital services tax based on turnover. I also announced a reduction of one third in the business rates for independent retailers. I am very happy to have a meeting with him and explain the changes in detail.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for mentioning the Treasury Committee report published this morning. The Treasury Committee is about more than Brexit, as I hope this House is too, and next week we will be holding a joint Committee session with the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee on business rates. I am sure that the Financial Secretary is looking forward to his evidence session greatly.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride) indicated assent.

Nicky Morgan: I see the right hon. Gentleman nodding. Business rates are an issue for retailers, and there are some simple things that could be changed now. Does the Chancellor agree, for example, that, for many retailers, their busiest period is Christmas when they could perhaps agree to pay more in business rates and then pay less in periods when they are less busy, so, overall, the same amount is paid, but there is flexibility in payment?

Mr Hammond: If my right hon. Friend is asking whether there is anything that local authorities can do to help with the cash-flow challenges of seasonally based businesses, I am very happy to take that away and look at it and see whether there is anything that we can do to help in that way. The challenge, of course, is that business rates raise £25 billion a year and are a vital part of our overall tax system. If we are to change them, we must find a sustainable way of replacing them.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Chancellor does not like it when I use what he calls my “synthetic passion”, so, very quietly, may I beg him to take very seriously indeed where we are as a nation? It looks like we are heading for a financial meltdown; people are losing their confidence in this country—[Interruption.] People are losing their confidence. My high street retailers—the big people and the small people—have their heads in their hands, and householders see a real likelihood of a 30% drop in their home value. Will he do something to stop this madness?

Mr Hammond: There are a couple of points there. First, I should just say to the hon. Gentleman that I was actually congratulating him the other day on his display of synthetic anger, which is one of the best in the House. On the wider point, the high street is facing challenges because of the uptake of online retailing across the UK at a faster rate than in any other large economy. That means that our high streets will have to adapt. The Government cannot save the high street from the need to change. What they can do is support it as it goes through that process of change.

22. [908144] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I am currently working with Fylde Borough Council and St Anne’s Town Council on a package of measures to regenerate the town of St Anne’s in my constituency. Will the Chancellor of the Exchequer meet me briefly in order to talk through how we can best take advantage of the excellent package of measures that he put forward in his Budget?

Mr Hammond: I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend. My hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary is the expert on this matter and he might find a meeting with him more fruitful, but either one of us is very happy to meet him.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Many of the shops and firms located on the high street are represented by the Federation of Small Businesses. Has the Chancellor seen what the FSB has said about the current Brexit position? Its chair has said:

“Planning ahead has now become impossible for a lot of firms as we simply don’t know what environment we’ll be faced with in little more than 100 days’ time…the economic warning signs are now flashing red.”

The Chancellor knew full well in our debate last week that the Prime Minister’s deal was not going to receive the support of the House. Is it not right that he is straight with her by telling her that businesses cannot face any more uncertainty and that a decision on the deal cannot be delayed and put off until late January, as some around her are suggesting?

Mr Hammond: I would be the first to agree that businesses need an end to uncertainty and clarity about the future, but frankly I think that the shadow Chancellor is probably the last person who should give us that lecture, because his policy agenda has been designed to create uncertainty and a lack of clarity for business in the future. What the Prime Minister is doing—absolutely rightly—is making a last attempt to see whether she can get further concessions from our partners in the
European Union, which is clearly the desire of this House. She will come back and report to the House when she has done so.

**John McDonnell:** Both sides of the House have to address the seriousness of the situation we face. The director general of the British Chambers of Commerce has said:

“Firms are looking on with utter dismay at the ongoing saga in Westminster”.

Today’s Treasury Committee report is devastating in its criticisms of the way in which the Government have sought to assess options not even on the table. A month ago, the Chancellor committed his support to a deal that guaranteed frictionless trade with the EU. Will he now be absolutely straight with the Prime Minister and tell her that unless she comes back with a deal that does fulfil his promise of frictionless trade, it will not succeed in protecting our economy and could not be supported?

**Mr Hammond:** The right hon. Gentleman can practise his synthetic concern at the Dispatch Box, but the remedy lies in his hands. There is a deal on the table that will end the uncertainty and allow this country to move on, and our polling shows that that is exactly what the British people want. All he has to do is get behind it, vote for the Prime Minister’s deal and we can all move on.

**Mr Speaker:** I say very gently to the Chancellor, to whom I have been listening with great care, that it is quite difficult to vote for something if there is not a vote. I am only trying to help him; it is a point that is so blindingly obvious that I am surprised that I have to state it, but manifestly I do.

### Children’s Services

3. **Bambos Charalambous** (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of funding allocated to local authorities for children’s services. [908123]

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):** Spending on the most vulnerable children has increased by over £1.5 billion since 2010. Thanks to our increased investment in childcare, the overall early years and children’s services budget has increased to £12.7 billion this year.

**Bambos Charalambous:** Will the Minister please acknowledge that she is simply putting a sticking plaster on the crisis in children’s social care? It is essential that children’s social care gets an extra £3 billion by 2025, and the Chancellor’s Budget commitment is less than 3% of the way there. Will the Minister admit that we are not on track to meet this target?

**Elizabeth Truss:** It is certainly the case that we are seeing rising demand for children’s services, but the important thing is that we help children’s services departments intervene early. We are rolling out a pilot programme this year to adopt models like that used in North Yorkshire that has reduced the number of children going into care, the number being arrested and the number ending up in accident and emergency, so it is important that we spend the money in the right way.

**Alex Burghart** (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Me and my colleagues on the all-party parliamentary group for children were delighted by the extra money that was found for children’s services in the Budget. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is important that we continue to distribute extra funds fairly across all regions of the UK?

**Elizabeth Truss:** My hon. Friend is exactly right. We also need to make sure that we are sharing the best practice of those authorities that are successfully helping to keep children out of care. We are also using the initiative of the children’s Minister to ensure that we are using independent school facilities better and helping with mental health problems. We need to do all those things.

### Further Education Funding

4. **Nic Dakin** (Scunthorpe) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the adequacy of funding for further education. [908124]

**Elizabeth Truss:** I regularly meet the Secretary of State for Education to discuss school and FE funding issues. We have protected the base rate of funding for 16 to 17-year-olds between 2015 and 2020.

**Nic Dakin:** The national funding rate for 16 to 18-year-olds has been frozen for five years. That is beginning to cause significant problems in delivering for this age group. Will the Government do something about it before it is too late?

**Elizabeth Truss:** What is important is that we are achieving better results for 16 to 18-year-olds. We are seeing more young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going to university and improvements in the quality of apprenticeships that are being taken up by young people. We are also putting extra money into the new T-levels, which are due to improve technical education.

**Andrew Selous** (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Our FE colleges are great poverty-fighting institutions that provide vital ladders of opportunity for our constituents. Given that school pay rises have been fully funded and FE has only had 0.1%, is there not a case for parity of esteem for teachers in FE colleges?

**Elizabeth Truss:** It was indeed very good that we were able to give teachers, particularly those on the lowest wages, a 3.5% pay rise this year—the highest pay rise seen for a decade. FE colleges are set up differently. They are independent institutions that have the wherewithal to change the pay for lecturers who work within them.

### Major Infrastructure Projects: Funding

5. **Priti Patel** (Witham) (Con): What criteria his Department uses to approve funding for major infrastructure projects. [908125]

**The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond):** All public spending proposals, including those for major infrastructure projects, are appraised against five key considerations: the strategic case for change, the net value to society of the intervention, the affordability of
the proposal, the robustness of delivery plans, and whether a realistic commercial deal can be struck to deliver the proposal. As I announced in the Budget, there will be a zero-based review of capital spending at the spending review next year.

Priti Patel: The Chancellor will know that Essex is a gateway for infrastructure and trade from around the world, but he will also know that we sorely lack major infrastructure investment across the county, despite having some very compelling business cases. What will he do to ensure that we can get the investment in for the A12, the A120, and the great eastern main line?

Mr Hammond: First, I acknowledge my right hon. Friend’s tireless work in campaigning to improve infrastructure and boost productivity in the Essex region, including her chairing of the Great Eastern Mainline Taskforce. We expect about £47.9 billion to be spent on the railway nationally between 2019 and 2024. I very much look forward to hearing the outcome of the Great Eastern Mainline Taskforce study. Regarding the A120, the Government are carefully considering Essex County Council’s proposals for a new dual carriageway to ensure that a robust plan is ready should that project secure funding in RIS 2—the second road investment strategy.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): “State of the North 2018”, a report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research earlier this month, highlighted the fact that public spending in the north of England fell by £6.3 billion since 2009-10 while spending in the south-east and the south-west was up by £3.2 million in the same period. Does this not demonstrate that the northern powerhouse is nothing but a vacuous slogan? What does the Chancellor assess will be the infrastructure funding available once we leave the EU?

Mr Hammond: We have had this one before. The Institute for Public Policy Research consistently publishes these figures and they are consistently wrong. I would urge the hon. Lady to look at the Infrastructure and Projects Authority’s figure. The problem with the IPPR is that it needs also to look at central Government funding to the regions. When we look at central Government funding to the regions, we will see a very different picture.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): One of the most important things for long-term infrastructure spending is knowing what the long-term programmes are going to be. These are not projects that can be put together in a year or two years. What reassurance can the Chancellor give us that he is making sufficient capital available so that the big infrastructure companies involved in our roads, railways and power operations have the knowledge that those funds are going to be available?

Mr Hammond: We are doing two things. First, we are investing more public capital than ever before under the previous Labour Government, but we have also put in place the National Infrastructure Commission to develop a transparent pipeline of projects both publicly and privately funded so that investors in infrastructure projects can have that visibility of future projects available.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): While accepting that it is not a simple matter, the criteria used tend to favour infrastructure development in the south, rather than the north. What more can the Government do to support major infrastructure development, particularly when it comes to transport, in the north of England?

Mr Hammond: I reject the hon. Gentleman’s accusation. The methodologies we use are designed to be fair and equitable in the distribution of infrastructure funding, but if he would like to meet me and my hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary, I am happy to go through the whole issue. We are as concerned as he is to make sure that infrastructure investment decisions are made on a transparent and equitable basis.

Sale of Public Assets: Value for Money

6. Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment his Department has made of whether value for money has been achieved by the sale of public assets. [908126]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): It is Government policy to explore options for the sale of corporate and financial assets where there is no longer a policy reason to retain them and value for money can be secured for taxpayers. All asset sales are subject to a rigorous value-for-money assessment before they can go ahead.

Meg Hillier: In the Government’s pursuit of paying down the debt, they are at risk of selling off assets that could be of benefit to the public in the long term. Although the Economic Secretary talks about the modelling, we know from our work on the Public Accounts Committee that the model is very debatable in exactly what the benefit and disbenefit will be to the public in the long term. Will he commit to assessing every upcoming sale rigorously and making sure that the Treasury is learning, so that it is not selling off the family silver and taking things away from the British public that belong to them?

John Glen: I read the report published by the hon. Lady’s Committee, and I recognise the need for a rigorous value-for-money assessment of every sale. That is why, with respect to student loans, which was the subject of the Committee’s last report, I was pleased that the NAO said that “the sale achieved prices at the upper end of these estimates” and that “the transaction...achieved value for money.” The Government will continue to be guided by that in every transaction they undertake.

Youth Unemployment

7. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the level of youth unemployment in the UK and EU27 countries; and if he will make a statement. [908127]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): Since 2010, the UK has seen a larger fall in youth unemployment than Germany, France and Italy combined.
Today’s employment figures show that the youth unemployment rate is down to a record low, with the number having nearly halved since 2010.

Michael Fabricant: It seems the message is simple: it is better to grow up in Lichfield than, say, Limoges or Lyon—does my right hon. Friend agree? If youth unemployment has fallen by 50% since 2010, how will she maintain that?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I am sure it is nothing but fun growing up in Lichfield, with him as the local Member of Parliament. The reason we have such low youth unemployment is that we have expanded the number of apprenticeships, reformed employment to make it easier to take on staff, and reformed our welfare system to make sure that it always pays to go into work.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): The evidence is that younger people are moving out of towns such as Wrexham, which I represent, and being dragged into the south-east of England and the south-east of Wales, because the opportunities for younger people in creative and dynamic industries are not being created in towns. What are the Government doing to address that?

Elizabeth Truss: I think it is good if young people have the opportunity to work and study across the country, and we should not say that people have to be kept in their place, as we often hear from the Labour party. By expanding broadband and roads and putting more money into infrastructure, we are making sure that every town in Britain can succeed.

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly open to the hon. Members for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) and for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) to take part in the exchanges on this question, to which their own rather later inquiries are entirely relevant.

8. [908128] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Can the Minister update us on what analysis the Treasury has conducted of the effectiveness of the apprenticeship levy in helping young people get into high-paid roles once they finish their apprenticeships?

Elizabeth Truss: We are seeing a growing number of young people taking up high-quality apprenticeships, which is fantastic news. We were able at the Budget to improve flexibility, so that it is easier for small and medium-sized enterprises and companies in the supply chain to take on apprentices.

16. [908138] Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Young people are our future. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that today’s Office for National Statistics figures showing that youth unemployment has fallen by 24,000 is a sign that this Conservative Government are delivering the jobs for young people that they need?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is right. It is surprising that we have heard nothing from Labour Members about today’s fantastic employment figures and record wage growth—the highest we have seen for a decade. The reason is the policies that this Government have pursued. We have the second highest youth employment rate in the G7, and we have been one of the fastest improvers.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Youth unemployment in the United Kingdom is sitting at about 3% below the equivalent figure for the rest of the European Union. The Chief Secretary puts that down to sound management of the UK economy. By a very similar margin, youth unemployment in Scotland is consistently lower than the equivalent figure for the rest of the United Kingdom. Surely that must mean that young people in Scotland have a better chance of gainful employment under a Scottish National party Government than they would if Ruth Davidson were First Minister.

Elizabeth Truss: I celebrate when the UK economy is doing well and I celebrate when the Scottish economy is doing well. I was recently in Scotland meeting the Scottish Finance Minister and talking about measures to improve growth. What I think will be interesting is to see, in tomorrow’s Scottish budget, whether the Scottish Government match the tax cuts that we have made across the rest of the UK—or will Scottish taxpayers end up paying more?

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The Resolution Foundation has found that millennials’ weekly earnings are less than those of the previous generation at the same age, which is unprecedented. That is due to more insecure and low-paid jobs, and less job mobility. As well as stronger workers’ rights, halting the decline in business investment would help, but that needs business confidence. Will the Chief Secretary tell me why her Government are listening only to the European Research Group, not to the voice of business when it says that we need a permanent customs union?

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady obviously has not seen today’s wages figures, which show that real pay grew by 0.8%, and we are seeing more and more young people getting into work.

Income Tax

9. Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): What progress has he made on reducing the amount of income tax that people pay.

[908129]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): The Government are committed to ensuring that working people can keep more of what they earn. At Budget 2018, I announced that the Government will increase the personal allowance to £12,500 and the higher rate threshold to £50,000 from April 2019, delivering on our manifesto promise one year early. This is a tax cut for 32 million people that will save a typical basic rate taxpayer a further £130 a year in tax. In the north-west and Merseyside, 196,000 of the lowest paid will have been taken out of income tax since 2015, leaving more of their hard-earned money in their pockets. The typical basic rate taxpayer across the UK will pay £1,205 less in 2019 than he or she did in 2010.

Antoinette Sandbach: Some 37,000 constituents in Eddisbury have had an income tax cut and 738 pay no tax at all, but many will pay another tax on their
income, which is national insurance. What steps is the Chancellor taking to reduce the burden of national insurance on the lowest paid?

Mr Hammond: The Government do consider national insurance contributions and income tax together to ensure an overall progressive tax system in which those earning the most pay the most. However, when we are looking at national insurance thresholds, it is important for us to remember that national insurance payments provide access to social security benefits: they build individuals’ entitlements to contributory benefits, including the state pension, as well as helping to fund the NHS. It is probably worth my mentioning that on average, in 2019-20, households in the lowest income decile will receive over £4 in public spending for every £1 they pay in tax.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Chancellor bear the whole issue of national insurance in mind, both now and when it comes to his Budget, in that people on low wages, who understand they will begin to pay national insurance much earlier than they pay tax, should retain more of their hard-earned money in net terms?

Mr Hammond: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s point, but I repeat what I have just said. We have to remember that people coming into national insurance at a lower rate also means people coming into entitlement to contributory benefits at that rate. We have a contributory principle in our benefits system, and national insurance is the key to it.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): When income tax was first introduced, it was supposed to be temporary. Can the Chancellor of the Exchequer update us on his plans finally to get rid of this tax, or will it, like the backstop, be with us for the next 200 years?

Mr Hammond: When I was in Brussels the other day, I was reliably informed that the kingdom of Belgium was originally intended to be a temporary construct, but it still seems to be with us. The world has moved on since the Napoleonic wars, as my hon. Friend may or may not celebrate, and I have to tell him that the Government have no plans to abolish income tax.

Mr Speaker: None the less, we are better informed as a result of what the Chancellor has just told us, on two points: Belgium and then the subsequent point. We are grateful to him for that.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): The lowest paid members of the armed forces stationed in Scotland pay less in tax than their counterparts elsewhere in the UK, so why will the Chancellor not stand up for the lowest paid members of the armed forces, either by giving them a tax cut to match their counterparts in Scotland or by giving them a proper pay rise?

Mr Hammond: My understanding is that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence has put in place special measures to ensure that those members of the armed forces who are disadvantaged by Scotland’s higher income tax rates are compensated, in order to avoid a situation where they regard postings to Scotland as hardship postings.

Leaving the Customs Union and Single Market: Scotland

10. Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Scotland on the economic effect on Scotland of the UK leaving the EU customs union and single market.

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): The Government are committed to delivering a deal that works for the whole of the United Kingdom—for every country and region within it, including Scotland—and Treasury Ministers of course have regular discussions with the Secretary of State for Scotland on just these matters.

Alison Thewliss: The Fraser of Allander Institute reports today that many firms are still ill prepared for a no-deal Brexit, that the worst-case scenario is the equivalent of making 100,000 people in Scotland unemployed, and that we face a recession double the size of that which Scotland experienced in the crash. Does the Minister not agree that the only way out of this Government shambles is to accept that staying in the single market and the customs union is the best compromise we can get?

Mel Stride: The best deal for the country, and indeed for Scotland, is the one that the Prime Minister has brought forward, and which she is now looking at with our European partners in Brussels: one that sees a free trade area right at the heart of our arrangements; that has no tariffs between ourselves and the EU27; that gives us control of our borders; that makes sure we put an end to sending vast sums of money to the European Union; that gives us control of our laws; and that enables us to conduct our own international trade affairs.

John Stevenson (Carlisle) (Con): Does the Minister agree that what is of equal importance are the economic relationships within the UK, and that initiatives such as the borderlands growth initiative are a priority for the people of the borderlands region?

Mel Stride: My hon. Friend is entirely right. That is why in the last Budget, Scotland benefited from £950 million in additional Barnett funding, and why we are investing £1 billion in up to six new city deals, including in the borderlands area—some of those deals have been concluded and some are under discussion.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): One of the many flaws in the Government’s analysis of the impact of Brexit on the regions and nations of the UK is that they did not tell us precisely what the GDP reduction would be compared with the status quo. Will the Minister now correct that and tell us how much worse off in GDP terms Scotland will be if we pursue the Brexit deal compared with the present day?

Mel Stride: These are estimates, of course, not forecasts. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that there would be no impact on output in Scotland in the long term—15 years from
the end of the implementation period—if we compare the White Paper deal with the situation as it stands today.

**Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): According to the Scottish Government’s own website, 61% of Scottish exports come to the rest of the UK and only 17% go to the European Union. Does the Minister therefore agree that Scotland’s economic interests are best served by remaining part of the United Kingdom?

**Mel Stride**: My hon. Friend is entirely right. The Scottish National party would like the country to stay in the EU, which would, for example, severely disadvantage the Scottish fishing industry. We have negotiated a very advantageous situation in terms of having control of our fishing as an independent coastal state. The point my hon. Friend makes is also entirely right: if Scotland were to be independent there would be frictions at the border between ourselves and Scotland, which would not assist with trade.

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On 19 November, the Exchequer Secretary told us that the Government’s analysis would contain a comparison between the Prime Minister’s deal and the status quo, and that it would contain insight from external stakeholders. It contains neither of those things. The Treasury Committee this morning produced a report that expresses disappointment that the Prime Minister’s deal has not been analysed. Yesterday, businesses lost 2% of their value. UK firms have no sympathy for a UK Government who are fart to put their shoddy deal before the House. Will the Chancellor stand by the words he said previously that “remaining in the European Union would be a better outcome for the economy”?

Will he find some backbone and make that case in Parliament?

**Mel Stride**: The cross-government departmental analysis shows clearly that the outcome of no deal would see the United Kingdom disadvantaged by 8% of GDP compared with the deal negotiated at the moment in the withdrawal agreement. The best option identified in the analysis is the current deal.

**Kirsty Blackman**: The analysis does not model the deal. That is what the Treasury Committee says and that is what we are saying. It models Chequers; it does not model the Prime Minister’s deal. The Minister cannot stand there and make that case to the House.

Because the Prime Minister pulled the vote this week, businesses are accelerating their contingency no-deal Brexit plans. They are heightening their preparations for an emergency no deal. The legacy of this Government will be lost investment, lost growth and lost jobs. Surely the Chancellor cannot think it is acceptable that, just to save the Prime Minister’s job, hundreds of other people have to lose theirs?

**Mel Stride**: The hon. Lady suggests that the analysis does not model the White Paper deal. It does exactly that, but it does it in terms of the future relationship and the political declaration which, as she will know, is a range of potential outcomes—so that is entirely what the analysis does. As I say, what it shows is that the deal we have negotiated with the European Union is the best deal available for the things that she and I hold dear: growth across our economy, growth in Scotland, jobs in Scotland and even lower unemployment in Scotland. The Scottish National party should row now in behind this deal to make sure that we do the best for the whole of the United Kingdom.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Scotland, just like the rest of the UK, has a substantial and successful financial services sector that is heavily dependent on market access to the EU. Will the Financial Secretary confirm that under the terms of the Government’s Brexit deal the financial sector gets no greater degree of market access than the equivalence arrangements that are already on offer to any third country, including for sectors such as insurance where no comprehensive equivalence regimes exist at all?

**Mel Stride**: I can enlighten the hon. Gentleman, although it is contained in the documentation that has come out of the negotiations. There will be an enhanced equivalence regime in respect of financial services. It is there in black and white. I am very happy to speak to him after questions and take him through the relevant paragraphs.

**Air Passenger Duty: Domestic Flights**

11. Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the airline industry on air passenger duty on UK domestic flights. [908131]

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury** (Robert Jenrick): The Government meet regularly with the airline industry to discuss a range of issues, including the future of air passenger duty and the domestic aviation market. I met a number of UK-based airlines earlier in autumn prior to the Budget.

**Sir Hugo Swire**: I make no apologies for continuing to lobby Treasury Ministers on the iniquity of air passenger duty and the discriminatory application of it to Flybe, based in my constituency at Exeter airport, which is the UK’s largest domestic carrier. Will the Treasury look again at Flybe and its particular set of circumstances?

**Robert Jenrick**: My right hon. Friend is nothing if not persistent, but we are not able to vary air passenger duty under EU state aid rules for different regions of the United Kingdom, including the south-west. That will change, or may, depending on the final state of things once we have left the European Union, but we have taken action in government: we have frozen short-haul rates for eight years in a row and exempted children going on family holidays, including to the south-west.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his response. He is well aware of the issue for Northern Ireland—the disadvantage that we have and the advantage that the Republic of Ireland has. Dublin airport has grown tremendously over the last period of time, so has he had any opportunity to speak to those in charge of Belfast International airport or Belfast City airport to gauge their opinion on how we can grow the economy?
Robert Jenrick: My right hon. Friend the Financial Secretary visited Northern Ireland earlier in the year and met representatives of the aviation sector. We announced at the Budget that we will be proceeding with a technical working group to look into and analyse further the remaining issues with respect to the hon. Gentleman’s proposal to devolve air passenger duty in Northern Ireland.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Manufacturing Sector

13. Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): What assessment has he made of the fiscal effect of the EU withdrawal agreement on the manufacturing sector.

[908134]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The Government have undertaken analysis to understand the impact of different EU exit scenarios on public sector net borrowing, which is a UK-wide metric, and we have published an assessment of the economic impact of EU exit on different sectors. For example, the analysis shows that manufacturing sectors are estimated to have a significantly higher output in the White Paper scenario than under the no-deal scenario.

Julie Elliott: I thank the Minister for that response, but is it not true that Office for National Statistics figures in the last few months have shown a 0.9% decline in manufacturing and a worrying 6.6% decline in the automotive sector? What are the Chancellor and the Minister doing to provide certainty to businesses in this area about the impact of this Government’s chaotic Brexit policy?

John Glen: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s question. The automotive issue is related to other factors, including diesel. The Government are focused on investing in infrastructure in the north-east. I think that she would be very pleased to know that since 2010, we have had 66,000 new jobs in the north-east as a consequence of more business growth.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I can introduce my hon. Friend to manufacturers who find it significantly easier to export to the rest of the world than to the EU. Is there a lesson in that?

John Glen: I think my right hon. Friend is right to say that the Treasury is looking at growth opportunities across the whole world, and that is why the Chancellor set out in his Mansion House speech the aspiration to have global financial partnerships that make the best of those opportunities.

Mr Speaker: I am perfectly open to the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) coming in on this question if he is minded to do so, but I am not psychic, so I cannot anticipate his wishes. He needs to stand if he wishes to do so.

14. Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): The Government’s Brexit shambles are making it more difficult for businesses in my constituency to function, risking jobs and livelihoods. Yesterday’s last-minute withdrawal of the meaningful vote has resulted in more uncertainty for businesses, which cannot plan for the future. How can any Chancellor justify making people worse off, not just in Bedford, but throughout the country?

John Glen: There is considerable analysis from the Bank of England and the Government’s analysis of the long-term effect of the different options, with a significant reference paper demonstrating the different scenarios and what lies behind them. The Government are seeking to deliver on the decision of the British people in the referendum in a way that maximises the opportunities for the British economy.

Support for Businesses and Entrepreneurs

15. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What steps is he taking to support businesses and entrepreneurs.

[908137]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Robert Jenrick): This Government are determined to make the UK the best place in the world to start a business. We are keeping taxes low and helping businesses and entrepreneurs to access the support that they need. We have cut corporation tax to the lowest rate in the G20 and made changes to business rates that will be worth over £13 billion by 2023.

Jack Brereton: I thank the Minister for that response. Walker’s Nonsuch, a family business in my constituency since 1894 and England’s finest toffee producer, enthusiastically welcomed the increased annual investment allowance. Does he agree that it is essential to continue to reduce tax on companies so that they invest in new equipment, increase productivity and create more jobs?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. While the Labour party wants to increase taxes on business, including on small businesses, we are cutting them, and the increased annual investment allowance will enable businesses such as the one in his constituency to invest in plant, machinery and new technology to drive it to future success.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The broken business rates system is having a seriously detrimental impact on our high streets, and that is seen right across York. Will the Minister meet me and York Retail Forum to discuss the impact it is having on York and, in particular, the proposals it wants to see on turnover tax?

Robert Jenrick: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady. We announced in the Budget that 90% of smaller retailers, including many in her constituency, would see a 30% reduction in their business rates, and the future high streets fund is designed exactly for communities such as the one she represents.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that keeping the VAT threshold at £85,000 demonstrates that the Government are firmly on the side of West Oxfordshire’s small businesses?

Robert Jenrick: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The VAT threshold in this country is high by international standards. We have retained it at that level to support small businesses, which this Government will always champion.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): Small businesses and subcontractors are still carrying the can for the collapse of Carillion. In the light of Interserve’s latest trouble, can the Minister update us on his Department’s
liaison with it as a client, and say what level of risk the taxpayer and small businesses have been put to by Interserve’s latest attempts to stay afloat by refinancing its debt for equity?

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman raises an important question. My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office is working closely on this matter, as he did with respect to Carillion. We want a wider base of companies supplying the Government and the public sector, to ensure that we have a resilient public sector in the eventuality that such situations happen again.

Children’s Services

17. Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the adequacy of funding allocated to local authorities for children’s services.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): We have increased the overall spending on early years and children’s services to £12.7 billion.

Liz McInnes: My local council, Rochdale Borough, predicts an overspend of £4.5 million this year on children’s services, with a predicted total overspend in England of £840 million, so will the Chief Secretary now admit that £84 million—just one tenth of the total overspend—goes nowhere near addressing this local and national crisis?

Elizabeth Truss: The £84 million is specifically to roll out pilots and projects that we know have worked to reduce demand on children’s services and make sure children get a better outcome, but at the Budget we also put in an extra £410 million, which councils can spend on either adult social care or children’s social care.

Mr Speaker: It is always worth staying for topical questions, if colleagues are interested.

Topical Questions

T1. [908146] Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): My principal responsibility is to ensure economic stability and the continued prosperity of the British people, and at this juncture the best way to achieve this objective is to back the Prime Minister’s Brexit deal, ensuring a smooth and orderly departure from the EU, delivering on the decision of the British people, securing a close economic partnership with our most important trading partners and protecting the jobs and living standards of our people. The deal will allow us to come together again and assure Britain of the brighter future it deserves.

Layla Moran: Modern universities will be hit hard by the unexpected changes to the teacher pension scheme. In fact, one is predicting a 5% reduction in its workforce, including around student support. Can the Chancellor give any assurances to universities struggling to cope with this change?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): The changes to public sector pensions have resulted from increases in contributions that will ultimately benefit lecturers retiring from university and retiring teachers. We are looking, through the Augar review, at the question of higher education funding overall, but ultimately it is for universities to find that extra money.

T4. [908149] Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): On Saturday in my constituency I met Tom, a student at the University of Gloucestershire, who shares my concerns that online digital marketplaces, social media companies and search engines should pay their fair share of tax. What steps are being taken to ensure that they do precisely that?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I thank my hon. Friend for that very important question. The Government recognise that the current international tax regime is not fit for purpose when it comes to taxing certain types of digital platform-based businesses—the types to which my hon. Friend has referred—and we are therefore working with the OECD and the European Union to arrive at a multilateral solution to ensure that the right tax is paid. However, we have made it clear, and the Chancellor made it clear in the Budget, that in the event that we do not secure a multilateral agreement, we will move ahead unilaterally by 2020 to ensure that those businesses pay a fair share of tax.

Peter Dowd: The merely synthetic construct that is before the House has nothing to do with the real concerns of my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) and my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman). It is the dodgy deal—the tuppence-ha’penny Brexit deal—of the Prime Minister. I am led to believe that the Chancellor has ostensibly, but forlornly, attempted to mitigate the Prime Minister’s disastrous handling of Brexit. If that is the case, will he continue his endeavours by using the powers in section 31 of the Taxation (Cross-border Trade) Act 2018 to maintain the UK in a customs union with the EU?

Mr Hammond: It is not the Government’s policy to maintain a permanent customs union with the European Union. Opposition Front Benchers often offer a customs union as if it were a magical solution, but it will not deliver us frictionless borders; it will introduce regulatory friction at our borders with the European Union, and it will introduce regulatory friction between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Peter Dowd: The Chancellor’s answer shows that, just like Parliament yesterday, we have been treated with contempt by him, and he has been treated with contempt by the Prime Minister and brushed aside. Let me ask him again: in the national interest—not the Tory party’s interest, or his own interest—at what point will he break cover and use the powers in section 31 of the Act which he initiated and which his Ministers guided through Parliament? Or is this just another Tory parliamentary sham?

Mr Hammond: Those powers are there specifically to deal with the customs union that we will need to create with the Crown dependencies, not for the purpose that the hon. Gentleman is suggesting.
T7. [908152] Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I have been listening carefully to these questions, and it strikes me that from members of all the Opposition parties we hear pleas that business wants uncertainty to end, but at the same time they have been deliberately seeking to provoke chaos by not supporting the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement. Does the Chancellor agree that they are playing political games with the lives and jobs of the British people?

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman was trying very hard, but—forgive me: I say this by way of kindly counsel to the hon. Gentleman, who is a new Member—questions must be about the policies of the Government, as the Clerk has just swivelled round to remind me, and not about the policies or tactics of the Opposition. We will leave that there, and come to Helen Goodman.

T2. [908147] Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to the answer that the Chancellor just gave my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd), may I point out that the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), pointed out last week that if we were to be in a customs union, we would need to have the same regulatory standards as the Europeans? That is true, because they fear unfair competition through a regulatory race to the bottom. If the Prime Minister does not succeed today, will the Chancellor revisit that option?

Mr Hammond: I am very confident that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will succeed in the mission that she is undertaking today, and I look forward to her reporting to the House on the progress that she has made.

T8. [908153] Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Lower taxes and a simplified tax system are crucial to long-term economic growth and competition. Will the Chancellor consider introducing new tax reforms in the future, including a combination of income tax and national insurance, to improve the efficiency of our tax system?

Mel Stride: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend about the importance of low taxes. Under this Government, corporation tax has been reduced from 28% to 19% and will be further reduced to 17%, and through the increase in the personal allowance that was announced in the Budget, we have taken about 4 million of the lowest-paid out of tax altogether. As for my right hon. Friend’s specific point about aligning national insurance and income tax, that is a very complex thing to do. There would be a considerable number of losers, as well as some gainers. However, the Office of Tax Simplification has looked into it in the past, and we will keep it under review.

T3. [908148] Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Given this country’s £5.9 billion net trading surplus with the EU in insurance, will the Chancellor take the opportunity of the demise of the withdrawal agreement to make financial services a part of the Prime Minister’s next attempt at a Brexit deal?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The City is very content with the deal we have on financial services, under which we would seek and secure enhanced equivalence decisions six months before the end of the implementation period, and the degree of dialogue with and support from the City has been constant throughout.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Given the £900 million of additional funding for the Scottish block grant announced in the Budget, what discussions has the Chancellor had with the SNP Scottish Government about following his example and cutting business rates?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I have regular meetings with the Scottish Finance Secretary, and of course the Scottish Government have the opportunity in their budget tomorrow to match the business rate cuts we have made in England.

T5. [908150] Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I met the travel association ABTA this morning and it had two requests for the Chancellor: first, that he rules out no deal, because implementing no deal preparations potentially puts its smaller members out of business; and secondly, to hear from the Chancellor and Government when the immigration paper will be available, because without it ABTA members can make no business plans.

Mr Hammond: I think I have been perfectly clear and consistent in expressing the view that no deal would be a very bad outcome for this country, and I will do everything I can to make sure that that is not an outcome we face.

A White Paper on the Government’s future migration policy will be published shortly.

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): When criticising a Labour Budget in 2005, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said that the taxpayer “is entitled to be protected from retrospective or retroactive legislation...”—[Official Report, 7 June 2005; Vol. 434, c. 1139.] but through the 2019 loan charge, that is precisely what HMRC is now doing to thousands of people who acted in good faith and in accordance with the rules at the time. May I urge my right hon. Friend once again not to backdate the charge to before 2017?

Mel Stride: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, but I have to fundamentally disagree with him. The arrangements entered into around disguised remuneration, for which the loan charge is being applied, were always defective at the time they were being used. They have been taken through the courts many times over many years by HMRC and been found to be defective. They also went through, in a particular case, the Supreme Court—the highest court in the land—and the scheme was found to be defective. So this is not a retrospective measure, but it is a question of tax fairness, and of course those who are involved can come forward and have discussions with HMRC, who, where there are difficulties around payment, will be sympathetic and enter into time-to-pay arrangements to make sure those people are protected as well as paying the right tax.

T6. [908151] Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): IPPR North’s analysis has shown that in the south £326 per head is spent on infrastructure, while only £156 per
person is spent in the north, and small towns like those in my constituency have been hit the hardest, with lack of infrastructure and the withdrawal of public sector services. We now find out this week that there will be a third bailout for Crossrail 2, costing £2.1 billion; the Government are simply going to give it a cheque. When is the north-west going to get a £2.1 billion equivalent?

Mr Hammond: First, I should make it clear that the additional support we are providing to Crossrail is in the form of a loan that will be repaid to the Government by London, so it is London taxpayers and London farepayers who will meet the cost of the overrun. The north-west is now the second-highest region in the UK for transport investment: per capita investment has risen from £648 per year between 2006-07 and 2009-10 to £1,129 a year between 2014-15 and 2017-18.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is very welcome that today’s figures show that wages are rising, unemployment is falling and we have a record number of people in work, but we still need more good jobs in Leicestershire. So, when the Leicestershire industrial strategy comes forward with exciting plans to boost the life sciences and small satellite manufacturing, will the Chancellor look closely at getting behind it?

Mr Hammond: The Treasury will look closely at that.

T9. [008154] Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): At our border, we need to ensure that we have security while securing freedom of movement of goods and people as well as gaining revenue. The head of HMRC has said that it will be almost impossible to do all those things if we crash out without a deal. The Chancellor keeps talking about a deal, but we are just over 100 days away from potentially crashing out, so what conversations is he having to ensure that we are not hit in the pocket as a result of a lack of revenue?

Mr Hammond: We have made it clear that we will prioritise the security of the UK, and that we will then prioritise the flow of trade. We will not prioritise the collection of customs tariffs. The hon. Lady will be aware that these are tariffs that we are not currently collecting; they would be additional revenues. We will treat that as something that we can do in slower time, if the situation arises.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Later today the House will debate fuel poverty. Does the Chancellor agree that the greatest lever that we can pull to alleviate the challenge of fuel poverty is to incentivise home energy efficiency? Will he look at what the Treasury can do to address that?

Mr Hammond: That is certainly one of the levers that we can pull, and I am happy to look again at how we support home energy efficiency.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): When will the Government bring forward proposals to allow well-funded credit unions to provide low-cost credit cards and low-cost car loans, and to invest in other social programmes such as energy co-operatives and housing schemes?

John Glen: Following on from the Budget, we have a series of measures to assist credit unions to expand their role in delivering affordable credit across communities. We have a scheme of work over the next three months to pilot interest-free loans and prize-linked saving schemes, to help credit unions to grow as they have been doing in recent years.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): What do the Government make of the Centre for European Reform’s report this week that warned of a 60% fall in UK financial services exports to the EU in the event that we lose access to the single market and put a free trade agreement in its place?

John Glen: The City remains very concerned to secure a deal in order to maximise the strong relationship that we have with the EU and with the rest of the world.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): What impact will Brexit have on our universities, particularly in Coventry? More importantly, our universities do projects with Europe and also work closely with the manufacturing industry, including companies such as Jaguar Land Rover. What are we going to do about that?

Mr Hammond: Our university sector is a vital asset to the UK. Over the past decade we have seen the universities working much more closely with industry, and that relationship is having a positive and advantageous effect on the growth profile and the technology uptake in the economy. As we leave the European Union, it is vital that our universities are able to go on exchanging students and teaching staff with European institutions, and we will do everything we can to ensure that that happens.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we should hear from my favourite estate agent. I call Mr Kevin Hollinrake.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. Banks that are guilty of the scandalous mistreatment of small businesses are allowed to design and oversee their own redress schemes, including determining the level of compensation paid to the victims. Does the Minister agree that Parliament and the regulator should take control of those processes?

John Glen: I have always said that the banks need to do more to restore their relationship with SMEs, and I welcome the scheme that UK Finance has announced to address unresolved historical complaints. I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend next week, with the Chancellor, to discuss the Government’s position.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The Inverness and Highlands city region deal was agreed a little while ago, and that is very good news. A whole shedload of money has been spent on Inverness—well done, Inverness!—but precious little has been spent on the outlying areas, including Wick and Thurso. That is surely not in the spirit of the deal. Should there not be an audit of this kind of deal in future?

Elizabeth Truss: We are doing city deals right across Scotland and they are having huge benefits for the local economy. We have also announced in the Budget a freeze
in whisky duty. The question now is how the Scottish Government will respond to that in their budget tomorrow. Will they cut income tax, and will they also cut business rates?

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): How many more trees will be planted as a result of investment announced in the recent Budget?

Mr Hammond: A very large number. I will go back to the Treasury and write to my hon. Friend with a precise figure.

Mr Speaker: Can I politely suggest to the Chancellor that if he were to lodge a copy of his reply with the requisite statistical information in the Library, I do not say that he will be garlanded, but he might come close to it?

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure that the Chancellor will be as concerned as I am by the words of the chief inspector of schools, Amanda Spielman, who said that cuts to funding are hitting the sustainability and quality of our further education colleges. Instead of doing an impression of the Grinch, will the Chancellor be our Father Christmas and give our FE colleges the funding and presents that they want for Christmas?

Elizabeth Truss: We have protected the funding of FE colleges since 2015. We are also investing £500 million in T-levels and improved technical education. More low-income students are going to university and getting high-quality apprenticeships.

Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): I welcome the extra £1 billion for the armed forces that was announced in the Budget. Does my right hon. Friend agree that only this Government’s sensible management of the economy has made that possible?

Mr Hammond: Yes. There cannot be strong defence without a strong economy.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): In the next two months, the Royal Bank of Scotland will close all but 56 branches in cities across England, leaving banking deserts in towns and rural areas like mine. What is the Chancellor doing to use the Government’s shareholding to exert public pressure on RBS and ensure that we have no banking deserts?

John Glen: The Government hold a 62.3% shareholding, but we do not run the bank. Decisions on the branch network are a matter for the bank.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that one of the most successful companies in our country, Johnson Matthey in my constituency, is committed to a fair-deal, not a no-deal Brexit because it feels that it is vital that there should be an orderly retreat, not chaos? Does he agree that the Prime Minister’s deal would achieve that?

Mr Hammond: Yes, and that is indeed the express view of the vast majority of businesses in this country.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): Will the Chancellor work with the Minister for the Cabinet Office and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to support my ten-minute rule Bill on project bank accounts for Government projects? It will protect small businesses from losses when tier 1 suppliers such as Carillion and Interserve collapse.

Mr Hammond: I am happy to look further at the hon. Lady’s Bill. It is an interesting idea and I know that the Cabinet Office commercial secretariat has been looking at her proposals.
EUROPEAN UNION (WITHDRAWAL) ACT 2018: STATUTORY OBLIGATIONS ON MINISTERS

12.42 pm

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): (Urgent Question): To ask the Attorney General to make a statement about the Government’s obligations under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I recognise that this question was the subject of much discussion and some speculation yesterday, so I hope to be able to put the minds of the right hon. Lady and other hon. Members at ease.

Put simply, in keeping with the clear intention of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Government will ensure that the question whether to accept an agreement is brought back to this House before 21 January. If Parliament accepts that deal, we will introduce the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill to implement the withdrawal agreement in domestic legislation.

If Parliament were to reject the deal, the Government would be required to make a statement on our proposed next steps and table a motion in neutral terms on that statement. Following the passing of the amendment to the business of the House motion last week, that motion will be amendable. It is our clear intention that this House will consider the matter before 21 January, and have the opportunity to decide on the deal.

Let me also say this clearly: in the unlikely and highly undesirable circumstances that, as of 21 January, there is no deal before the House, the Government would bring a statement to the House and arrange for a debate, as specified by the law.

I am confident that we will have a deal that the House can support. I hope that the statement puts to rest hon. Members’ concerns about the Government’s commitment to meet the spirit, as well as the letter, of the withdrawal Act, and to respect the will of the House.

Yvette Cooper: I thank the Minister for those assurances but, in the current circumstances, they are not enough. I asked this urgent question of the Attorney General because we need to know the Government’s legal interpretation of section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act and we need to be assured that, as well as legally, the Government will abide by the spirit of the Act. Now that the Government have pulled the vote, we do not know when a vote will come on the deal, or even whether a vote will come.

No. 10’s official spokesman said this morning that the vote would come by 21 January, and the Minister has said that it will come by 21 January. However, yesterday morning the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who is sitting on the Front Bench, confirmed that the vote was 100% going to happen. Yesterday, at 11 am, No. 10’s spokesman said that the vote “is going ahead.” By 3.30 pm, the Prime Minister had pulled it.

The Minister’s warm words are therefore not enough, when so much is at stake. Who knows? This goes for the Cabinet and for all Conservative Members, too. None of us knows whether the Prime Minister is going to pull the vote again, or whether she is even going to table a vote on the deal again.

If we get to 21 January and there is no deal, the agreement of Parliament was that the Government should make a statement, that Parliament should be able to vote on it and that it should be amendable. The Minister says that, in the unlikely event that there is no deal, that would happen. However, we need an urgent assurance from the Attorney General that the Government will not find a loophole in this by saying that there is a deal, even though we have not voted on it, and thereby avoiding the requirements of section 13 subsections (7) to (11), which would require a vote by 21 January.

In other words, if the Government never quite get round to offering a vote on this deal until it is too late, but also do not have a vote on no deal, keeping us in limbo—no vote on the deal and no vote on no deal—it would be a constitutional outrage. It would upend the spirit of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act and, much worse, it would either let the country drift or force the country into no deal without a parliamentary vote.

We need written assurances from the Attorney General on the Government’s interpretation of the Act, and we need the assurance that, even if there has been no vote on this deal and even if the Government still claim that the deal applied were there to be no vote on it by 21 January, the Government will still abide by section 13 subsections (7) to (11) and ensure there is a statement and an amendable vote on their plans, including on whether or not this means no deal, and that it will happen, under any circumstances, by 21 January.

I make no apology for my purpose in asking this urgent question. I already think 21 January is far too late for businesses and for Government Departments, which will already be thinking that they have to chuck everything at preparing for no deal. I want to stop this country careering into no deal, either by accident or by the deliberate intention of the Government, with all the damaging consequences for jobs, for prosperity and for our national security, without Parliament having a say and without Parliament being able to stop that happening. Even if other Members do not agree with me in that purpose, I hope that they will agree that this Parliament cannot be ignored, which is why we need the Attorney General’s written advice.

Mr Walker: I have great respect for the right hon. Lady. I understand that she came to this House expecting to have a row about the Government’s interpretation, and I understand the questions she has just asked. I am responding to this urgent question because my Department is responsible for the legislation that enacts the deal, and I have given her our very clear interpretation of that legislation, which is that we will have a motion before the House by 21 January, in all the different scenarios I talked through in my statement.

The answer to the right hon. Lady is very clear. We respect the decision made by this House that the Government should come back to the House with a motion in the event that no deal had been agreed or in the event that this House had rejected a deal. That is clear from my statement.

What we are therefore saying is that there will be a motion by 21 January, and I agree with the right hon. Lady—I would much rather it were, and I fully expect it
to be, sooner. I fully expect this House to have the opportunity to debate a withdrawal agreement that it is able to support. So let us work together to achieve that, but let us not allow some of the conspiracy theories and the scare stories that have been told about this to run away when I have just clarified the Government’s position.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I have great sympathy for the points made by both the Minister, who is acting with integrity, as he always has done in his parliamentary career, and the right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper). It is unquestionable that this Parliament must have a say—a meaningful vote—on the deal, or no deal, that comes about. Can the Minister give a categorical assurance that there will be no trickery by the Government to stop Parliament from having a say?

Mr Walker: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend’s words, and I am happy to give that categorical assurance. As my statement reflected, we will be putting a motion before Parliament, even in the circumstances that no deal was before the House, but I strongly believe and expect that there will be a deal before this House, which I will be urging Parliament to support.

Nicky Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) for applying for this urgent question and to you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. I am grateful for the Minister’s response, but the reality is that the Attorney General should be here to speak about the legal implications of this agreement. Yesterday, the Prime Minister used the phrase “an accidental no deal” in this House. The fact that she used that phrase is itself evidence of a dereliction of leadership. Section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 is therefore crucial to this House’s ability to prevent a chaotic no-deal outcome, which would do enormous damage to our security, economy and society.

I wonder whether the Minister can answer the following questions. The Prime Minister’s official spokesperson has reiterated today that the Government will bring back the meaningful vote by 21 January, but is it not completely contrary to the national interest for the Prime Minister to run down another six weeks on the clock when all she is seeking is reassurances and clarification on a document that Parliament already understands? If we are relying on the Government’s word or, to use the Minister’s phrase, “clear intention” that they will keep to the 21 January deadline, rather than the clear force of the law, does he not understand that in this week of all weeks that constitutes no reassurance at all?

Yesterday, the Prime Minister could not properly answer questions about the legal force of the 21 January deadline, and the Leader of the House could not properly answer questions about the legal status and force of the amendment from the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). The reassurance that was just given by this Minister means nothing without the legal backing of the Attorney General, who is not here. Is the truth not that this decision to pull the vote was made in panicked haste, without thinking through the economic, political and constitutional implications for our country?
prefer to stay in the EU on our current terms and conditions, as the European Court of Justice made clear is possible yesterday?

Mr Walker: The hon. and learned lady should pay attention to what I have already said in my statement, which is that we will be bringing a motion before the House, either on this deal, as I would much prefer, with the assurances that the Prime Minister will by then have won, so that this House can vote on that, or even in the circumstances that that were not on the table. She raises the idea of a people’s vote once again, and we very clearly had a people’s vote. We had that people’s vote across the whole of the UK in 2016, and it is our duty as Members of this House to deliver on that.

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for his clarifications, but may I press him on one point that I do not think he covered? Is he confirming that if there is, under section 13(8), a statement at some point before 21 January, as there must be under that section if the Prime Minister has by then concluded that she cannot complete a deal, that statement will be accompanied by a motion which, though in neutral terms, will be amendable? Or did his point about the amendment cover only a statement and motion under sections 13(1) and 13(4)?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend is typically meticulous in his questioning. My understanding is that the intention of the House in passing that motion is that it should be amendable in all three cases set out in section 13.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I am afraid the Minister, for whom I have great respect, has not wholly succeeded in his aim of providing reassurance to the House, because what we learned yesterday is that today’s assurances can disappear tomorrow like a puff of wind. Can he clarify the following? If the withdrawal agreement comes back—the Government say that it will—before 21 January and is defeated, legally speaking, for the purposes of section 13 of the 2018 Act, is there still “agreement in principle” with the European Union? This is a very important point in view of the previous question that was asked, because even if it is defeated, for the purposes of the Act the only thing that is referred to as “agreement in principle” has been reached. The Prime Minister and the Government said, I believe on 28 November, that agreement in principle had been reached. So can he clarify that that remains the case, even if the withdrawal agreement is defeated?

Mr Walker: I have great respect for the right hon. Gentleman and the work that he does with the Select Committee, but I must say that in this case I do not share his interpretation. Section 13 is very clear: in scenarios in which either a deal had not been reached or a deal had been voted down, a statement would be required. That is my understanding of the commitment that we have made. We would need to come to the House and have that vote, even in circumstances in which a deal had been brought before the House and turned down.

Joseph Johnson (Orpington) (Con): Just to press further on this point, will my hon. Friend clarify, in the light of the Prime Minister’s statement yesterday, whether the Government still maintain that a political agreement has been reached in line with the statutory statement presented to Parliament on 26 November? As things stand today, do we still have a valid initialled deal?

Mr Walker: The Prime Minister has been clear that of course we have reached an initial deal with the EU, but she has listened to the concerns of this House and gone back to seek to discuss that deal and to seek assurances on it. I think that means that she will want to put before the House a deal with those assurances and to ensure that the House has its meaningful vote on that arrangement.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): I have some sympathy for the Minister, because he is doing his best to give the House assurances about what is likely to happen, but the fact is that he is appearing on behalf of a Prime Minister who has completely shredded her credibility by doing what she did yesterday. She was prepared to send out her Cabinet colleagues to make one assertion with confidence in the morning, while she was plotting to reverse it at the same time as she had them in front of the TV cameras. Despite the Minister’s personal integrity, why should we believe a single thing that he tells us today?

Mr Walker: I believe I am standing here on behalf of a Prime Minister who is seeking to do the right thing for the country—to bring us together and to secure an agreement that is in our best interests and that this whole House can support.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): My hon. Friend has been absolutely crystal clear that there will be a meaningful debate and a meaningful vote. Does he share my concern that Opposition Members are more interested in driving damaging uncertainty than in supporting the Prime Minister, who is trying to deliver the best deal for this country?

Mr Walker: Frankly, I do share that concern. We see today this focus on process rather than outcomes. We should all be focused on getting the best outcome from this whole process.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Unfortunately for the Minister—he should not take this personally—any assurances that the Government give have the half-life of one of those isotopes that we are all so worried about. He must be aware that there will be absolute uproar in the House if the Government try to engineer, by trickery or chicanery, avoiding having a vote on this deal. Will he give us a categorical assurance that if we do get to vote on the deal and, as is expected, amendments in support of a people’s vote are tabled, the Government will not seek to thwart any such amendment or vote?

Mr Walker: To have a suggestion from the Liberal Democrats of assurances not being worth the paper they are written on is quite strong. The House has already voted, many times, on a second referendum, and every time the idea has been defeated, because clearly the majority of Members of this House want to respect the people’s vote that we had in 2016.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): After we get the vote and vote for the agreement, at what stage can we subsequently walk away from trade negotiations should the terms prove sufficiently unattractive?
Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend asks me a question that is well beyond the scope of this urgent question, so I shall not attempt to answer it at this time.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Why would anyone believe a word that the Government say about when the vote will take place when Ministers have spent weeks promising that the vote would be today, and when the Prime Minister’s only hope of survival is to delay the vote till the last possible minute to try to force MPs to change their minds?

Mr Walker: I simply do not agree with the hon. Lady’s narrative. The Prime Minister has been clear that she has listened to the House. She understands the concerns throughout the House and wants to take them back to European counterparts to make sure that we have the best deal before the House. She will then bring that back here and put it before the House for us to decide on.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: That was a very engaging wave from the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), but it is not the normal means by which to procure the attention of the Chair. It would be a pity to squander the right hon. Gentleman at such an early stage of our proceedings, so I shall come to him in due course.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): In 108 days we run out of road, and the only red line that has not been laid down is the one in front of the cliff’s edge, over which we would fall into a chaotic no deal. I urge the Minister and the Government to bring forward the meaningful vote to next week, because by then at least we will know what cosmetic changes have been made in Brussels.

Mr Walker: I say gently to my hon. Friend that we should make sure the Prime Minister has the opportunity that she seeks to get the best deal in front of this House, and that we have the assurances we need so that the whole House can get behind the deal. My hon. Friend is a great champion of working across party lines; we whole House can get behind the deal. My hon. Friend is beginning to look like she has withdrawn the vote for her benefit, not for Parliament’s benefit. Is it not time to bring back the withdrawal agreement, have the vote and allow Parliament to make a decision? Like the Minister, I do not favour a second referendum. I would like Parliament to reach a conclusion on Brexit.

Mr Walker: We are all clear that Parliament will have its crucial say in this process, which is why I made this statement to make it clear that there will be a meaningful vote before Parliament. I agree with my right hon. Friend that the date of 21 January is at the back end of when we want to see that vote. We want to see it come sooner, and I am sure that the Prime Minister will strive to ensure that she can bring it to the House even sooner than that.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I have considered the withdrawal agreement in good faith, but time after time the Prime Minister has broken her word, and over the past two and a half years she has sought to withhold information about the impact that the different options will have on us from not only the House but the public. I have businesses in Wigan that are not bidding for contracts because they do not know whether they will be able to deliver them, I have thousands of food manufacturing firms that will go under if no deal becomes a political reality, Will the Minister begin to restore some trust among Members of Parliament, whose votes the Government still supposedly seek, and tell us today, categorically, that the Government will explore every option, including the extension of article 50, before they will allow the country to leave the EU with no deal at all?

Mr Walker: We have before us an option to make sure that we leave with a negotiated deal with an implementation period. The Prime Minister is seeking to improve that deal still further to make sure that the House has the best option to move forward on an orderly basis. That is the route that we should take.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I genuinely believe that there are Members on the Labour Back Benches who, like me, want to avoid a no-deal Brexit and the risks of a divisive second referendum. I therefore urge the Minister, whom I know to be a thoughtful listener, to spend some of the time that has become available in his diary with some of those Labour Back Benchers, to see whether their concerns can be addressed.

Mr Walker: I am always happy to take my hon. Friend’s advice, and I would certainly be happy to do that.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): There are circumstances in which, under section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Government are required to make a statement on how to proceed by 21 January. Those are if the Commons decides not to approve a deal presented by the Government,
or if no agreement in principle can be reached. But the House of Commons Library, in its note prepared overnight on this, says:

“If the Government maintains that its political agreement persists, the requirement to make a statement could be avoided.”

That is why Opposition Members are suspicious. Is the Government’s strategy to continue to give us a meaningful vote, or is it instead to run down the clock and, in the face of no deal, in the words of “The Godfather”, make us an offer that we can’t refuse?

Mr Walker: The right hon. Gentleman asks an important question, and I think I have already provided the answer. Let me just repeat the line towards the end of my statement in answer to this urgent question: in the unlikely and highly undesirable circumstances that, as of 21 January, there is no deal before the House, the Government would bring a statement to the House and arrange for a debate, as specified by the law. That answers his question precisely.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): Section 13(2) provides that the meaningful vote should, so far as practical, be held before the European Parliament decides whether to consent to the withdrawal agreement. The withdrawal agreement has been concluded, but not approved. Will my hon. Friend assure the House that the meaningful vote will take place before the European Parliament makes that decision?

Mr Walker: Yes. I am happy to give my right hon. Friend that assurance.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): This whole situation is bonkers and the public are, frankly, fed up with this carry-on. We already know the impact that it is having on the academic sector, so will the Minister confirm that allowing this to drag on into the new year is simply unacceptable to the electorate? Will he categorically rule out the possibility of the Government waiting until March before announcing no deal?

Mr Walker: I could not have been much clearer in my statement earlier that we will be having a meaningful vote before 21 January. I am very clear that I want the Prime Minister to go and get the assurances that she seeks and to come back to this House as soon as possible, and I am sure that that is exactly what she intends to do.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I refer Members to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

This is important not only for everybody in this country, but for the people in Gibraltar. Will my hon. Friend first reassure me that the initial deal still exists as of this moment and is still a legal deal on the table, because that certainty is really important for them; and, secondly, take on board the fact that, for those of us who want to support the deal, the sooner that it is brought back the better, as we wish the Prime Minister well in what she is trying to do?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. He and I have both recently heard directly from the Chief Minister in Gibraltar, who is very clear in his support for this deal because he thinks that it meets Gibraltar’s key interests and preserves British sovereignty. Those are crucial points, which I look forward to supporting when the deal returns to the House.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am sorry to sound suspicious, but the Minister has used two words in his statement that make us all suspicious. They are “assurance” and “reassurance”, which we have heard time and again from this Government, and then they have reneged on them. Given that a vast majority of MPs in this House wish to prevent no deal—indeed, the Chancellor repeated that in Treasury questions just before this urgent question—will the Government either rule that out now, or bring a motion to the House so that we can vote on it and rule out a no-deal scenario?

Mr Walker: What we are talking about is section 13 of the withdrawal Act, which this House has already debated. What I have delivered today is the Government’s clear interpretation of that and the fact that there will be a meaningful vote in this House.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): Will my hon. Friend confirm that motions of this House, amended or otherwise, do not override the law?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is, of course, right that the law has a senior and more important effect, but what we are talking about here is the law. We are talking about the EU (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will understand that yesterday shredded all the good will that was left in the House on assurances such as these. I listened to the Attorney General last Monday when he told this House that he had “a solemn and constitutional duty...to advise it on these legal questions objectively and impartially, and to place such legal expertise as I have at its disposal. The historical precedents strongly support that view. The House may be sure that I shall discharge this duty with uncompromising and rigorous fidelity.”—[Official Report, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 546.]

The fact that he is not here today to give that legal weight to what the Minister is saying is a concern to all of us who have to go back to our constituents to explain what on earth is happening in this place. Can the Minister therefore confirm that the Attorney General has consulted him on what he has said today, and that he will publish any legal advice that he has given in the light of yesterday’s rulings and what happens on section 13?

Mr Walker: I am sure that if the hon. Lady were to approach the Attorney General, he would discharge all those responsibilities, but this question was about an Act for which my Department is responsible. Of course it is right that I should be at the Dispatch Box as a Minister in the Department for Exiting the European Union to answer questions on our legislation.

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): The leader of the Labour party regularly attends meetings of his European socialist colleagues, many of whom are actually in Government. Is the Minister aware of anything positive whatsoever that has come out of those meetings to facilitate the deal and help to deliver on Brexit, or is
the Labour party, as far as delivering a workable Brexit is concerned, part of the problem, not part of the solution?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his inquiry, which suffers from the rather notable disadvantage that the Leader of the Opposition has no responsibility for the formulation of policy or for the continent-wide attempts to secure an agreement. Therefore I emphasise, on advice, that there is no responsibility on the Minister to attempt to answer what was no doubt a well-meaning, but, in practical terms, disorderly question.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Will the Minister confirm once again for the benefit of this House and for the people in the country who will read his remarks and listen to what he has said that there are absolutely no circumstances—no legal interpretation, no scenario that may crop up over the next few days or weeks—that will deny this Parliament the opportunity to vote on whatever the Government come back with? I say to the Minister that, as he has heard from Members across the House, trust in the Government is such that he has a lot of work to do to make people believe him.

Mr Walker: I am very happy to say that the short summary of my statement is that there will be a meaningful vote. There will be a meaningful vote in all circumstances, so I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend referred to the withdrawal agreement Bill that would follow a successful vote for the agreement. Does he agree that that will be a major piece of constitutional legislation covering some important issues such how citizens’ rights are embedded, what the legal base is for laws during the transition period, what the duty on our Supreme Court is in terms of Court of Justice decisions, and so on? What steps will he take to make sure that there is an opportunity to consult widely on that, and that we are not left with inadequate time to consider those very important points?

Mr Walker: My right hon. and learned Friend makes an important point: that will be a crucial piece of legislation as we move forward. Of course it is right that the House should have its meaningful vote first before the introduction of the withdrawal agreement Bill, but we have been doing a huge amount of work to prepare that legislation. We have published a White Paper on it, and we shall continue to engage with the House and its Select Committees on it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Prime Minister has mentioned on a number of occasions recently, including in her statement yesterday, that it is her deal, no deal or no Brexit. How are the Government preparing for the Prime Minister’s third option? If she is not taking it seriously, why would she mention it?

Mr Walker: I think the Prime Minister has been very clear that that is a political comment about the outcomes if other people were to take control. We are very clear that we will not be revoking article 50—my Secretary of State made that very clear yesterday—so it is a question of having an orderly withdrawal with an agreement, or no deal. The orderly withdrawal with an agreement is the preferable of the two options.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is absolutely right that you, Mr Speaker, your Clerks, the Library and the Government will want to agree on the rules arising from the legislation thus far passed, so that we can have certainty over the Brexit endgame. But that endgame is the most chaotic and uncertain scenario imaginable within the entire Brexit process, so are we not better finding common ground now so that we can support a deal and deliver Brexit for the British public?

Mr Walker: I wholly agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an important point. It is really important that this House now works together to ensure that we can find that common ground and improve the withdrawal agreement when it is brought back to this House.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Government’s credibility is in threads. If this country faces a no-deal exit from the European Union, the fault and responsibility will lie squarely with the Government, particularly the Prime Minister. Having listened to the Minister this afternoon, is it not the case that what we are now facing is not a meaningful vote, but a blackmail strategy?

Mr Walker: Absolutely not. I have made it clear that this House will have a meaningful vote under all circumstances, but it is incumbent on MPs on both sides of the House to remember what they promised to their electorate—that is, delivering the outcome of the referendum and getting a good negotiated deal. That is something that we should all be supporting when the withdrawal agreement returns to this House.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): If Opposition Members continue to oppose any of the very generous compromises that have been put forward, at what point will he withdraw the offer of £39 billion for the bureaucracy in Brussels and spend it preparing for the full, clean, World Trade Organisation Brexit that over 17 million people have voted for?

Mr Walker: My hon. Friend always makes his point with great force and power, but today I am talking about the Government’s commitments to this House and how we will meet them; that is what I want to focus on. We have put before the House a withdrawal agreement, which of course includes settling our dues with Brussels, but crucially also ending them and taking control of our money as we leave the EU.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday the Prime Minister failed to put before the House the deal that she herself described as the “best possible negotiable deal”, and now she is travelling the capitals of Europe pleading for help. There is a growing sense of chaos in the country, and a feeling that the Government are simply not in control. Does the Minister agree that one of the options he should be considering is putting this issue back to the people with an option to stay in the EU—the best deal we have?
Mr Walker: I do not agree with the hon. Lady. It is incumbent on us all to remember that it was this House that legislated for the referendum, and that promised people their views would be listened to and followed. It is therefore for us to deliver on the outcome of the referendum, as both our parties promised in their manifestos just last year.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is vital that the House has its say on this crucial issue, so I am grateful for the Minister's assurances, but 21 January is nearly six weeks away. Does he agree that that should be a deadline, not a target? If this matter can come back before the House, it should. We need to resolve this at the earliest possible opportunity.

Mr Walker: I am happy to agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The problem is that nobody believes the Government anymore. That is exactly why the Attorney General should, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, be forced to come to the House and to put in writing the assurances that the Minister has given. Today the Minister has simply been put up as chaff for other Ministers above his pay grade who, quite frankly, are willing to resort to any level of trickery and contempt for this House. That is the reality. Speaking of trickery, will the Minister be very clear about whether any EU member states or European Commission officials were informed of the plan to pull the vote before the Cabinet discussed it and before this House was told?

Mr Walker: I have to say that chaff is a new description for me that I am honoured to receive from the hon. Gentleman. I am here to be very clear about the Government's interpretation of section 13 of the withdrawal Act and to answer that we will have a meaningful vote. I am not here to speculate on other matters.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The contempt with which this Government hold Parliament seems to know no bounds. The answers of the Minister today suggest that it is either their way or the highway. That is not good enough. Parliament's voice must be heard on this issue. Apart from the Minister's word, what actual consequences are there if the Government do not bring a vote to the House of Commons by 21 January? There seem to be no consequences for holding Parliament in contempt, nor for pulling the vote that should have taken place today, so what will the consequences be if the Government do not bring a vote to the House before 21 January?

Mr Walker: The Government will bring a vote before 21 January.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Yesterday we had a significant judgment from the European Court that opens up another option, so when the Minister tells the Attorney General that we want written advice, can the Attorney General take into account yesterday's judgment in what he sends us?

Mr Walker: I am sure that the Attorney General takes into account all the judgments of the European Court of Justice, but I do not believe that that changes the policy of the Government, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made very clear yesterday.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): The date of 21 January is a long way in the future, particularly for those EU citizens whose lives are on hold and who are struck with uncertainty. The Minister said that he thought that the vote could be brought back a lot earlier than that. Could we hear a bit more of the Minister's thoughts? Given that there are more than four sitting weeks until 21 January, why can we not have this vote before we break for the Christmas recess?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman will know that the date of 21 January is set in the Act because that is what Parliament decided should be in the Act. I have been very clear that I would like to see this voted on before then, and I think that many Members across the House would like to see that. The hon. Gentleman talks about the important matter of European citizens. The deal that we have negotiated is the best way of securing their livelihoods and allowing them to continue as before, but of course the Government have also made significant commitments about the unilateral steps we would take, even in the absence of a deal.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): This week's events have meant extra cost and extra disruption for business and public services. Can the Minister help me to understand why we are expected to believe his assurance that the Government will bring forward a vote before 21 January, in several weeks' time, when we were unable to believe the word that was given by Government Ministers yesterday morning that there would be a vote today? May I also invite him to use a different expression? Rather than saying, "We will have a vote before 21 January", can he tell us in legal terms that this Government must have a vote before 21 January?

Mr Walker: I have been very clear in my statement that the Government want to follow both the spirit and the letter of the law. I think that is the answer to the hon. Lady's question.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I think we all have a fairly shrewd idea that no amount of sugar-coating is going to salvage this deal. It is dead in the water and is highly likely to fail when it does meet the test of a parliamentary vote. Given that that is the situation, what contingencies are the Government planning? They have agreed that it would be disastrous for us to crash out with no deal, so are they ruling out any option, including potentially unilaterally revoking the article 50 declaration?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman talks about contingencies. Of course, a huge amount of contingency work has been done, including by the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Chris Heaton-Harris). We are very clear that the best way forward is to secure a deal to ensure that we have the best deal possible, and that is exactly what the Prime Minister is fighting for.
Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Given the dysfunctional and duplicitous behaviour that we have seen in the last few days, would not it be best if the Government listened to the very wise words of the former Conservative Prime Minister Sir John Major, speaking in Dublin today, who has asked for the revocation of article 50?

Mr Walker: No, I do not believe that it would be best. We have to remember that we were all elected on manifestos that respected the referendum result, and we have to deliver on that. I do pay heed to Sir John Major, when he makes the point about how important it is that we protect the peace process and the Good Friday agreement. That is exactly what we seek to do through the negotiations with the EU.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Government’s handling of this whole thing has been woeful. After yesterday’s shambles, I met staff of Reckitt Benckiser this morning, who told me that they are having to step up the preparations for a no-deal scenario, having received a letter from the Health Secretary saying that there could be problems at the ports for up to six months, which would mean major problems for pharmaceuticals and getting raw materials into the country. Is it not time that we now actually get on and have the vote? The Prime Minister will not bring back any major change to the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration; let us have the vote before Christmas, and then we can see what we need to do next in the new year.

Mr Walker: I regularly meet pharmaceutical businesses to talk to them about the Government’s plan for a deal, and also no-deal contingency planning such as that which the hon. Lady talks about. I recognise that the industry strongly supports securing a deal that provides an implementation period that provides a clear pathway ahead for trade. We want to see that delivered. I think it is right that the Prime Minister should seek to put the best possible deal before this House.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The success of Jaguar Land Rover in my constituency has transformed the lives of thousands of workers, but they now face a bleak new year. Six weeks more of uncertainty take us ever closer to the cliff. Pending Parliament deciding where we eventually go, we must rule out no deal. Will the Government therefore call a vote next week on no deal—no Brexit?

Mr Walker: I have been very clear that the Government will allow a meaningful vote that will follow the letter and the spirit of the withdrawal Act. However, the best way to ensure the certainty that businesses crave is to make sure that we support across this House a withdrawal agreement that secures the implementation period and secures a good trade deal for our country.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Figures from yesterday show that the Minister’s Government spent £100,000 on social media promoting the Prime Minister’s deal before withdrawing it from the vote. Will he do two things? First, will he apologise for squandering public money in that way; and will he also give a guarantee that he will waste no more public money on pointless propaganda during this needlessly extended process?

Mr Walker: The Government are absolutely right in seeking to secure a deal that is in our national interest—in the national interest of the whole of the United Kingdom—and we should continue to do so.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister acknowledge the enormous disquiet not just in all parts of this House but outside this place, across our country, that the expected vote today was pulled, despite repeated promises that it was 100% going ahead? We have heard from Europe that there is no chance of any change to the deal. Will his Government now take responsibility, stop this uncertainty—which, as he will have heard from countless colleagues, is having such a detrimental impact on our businesses and also on our nation’s mental health—and commit to bring forward the vote by Christmas so that we can all start 2019 with some certainty?

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady has called for certainty. The best way for certainty is that this deal is brought back to this House with the assurances that European capitals are already saying that they can give to aid its ratification, so that we can all get behind it, back it and provide that certainty.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): Yesterday’s fiasco has done further damage to this country’s once proud reputation for stability and good governance. Could the Minister explain to the House how another 40 days of drift and dither is going to help to restore that battered reputation?

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman, who once had aspirations to lead the Opposition, might have provided perhaps less drift and dither from the Opposition Front Bench. But what he would not have done, I think, is actually do what the Labour manifesto promised to do, which was to deliver on the outcome of the referendum.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I told my constituents in Bristol West that I will be voting against the Government’s deal and voting against no deal this evening, but the Government have pulled those votes, and yesterday the Minister’s boss said that he would not be revoking article 50. So is not the truth that this Government are trying to hold a no-deal Brexit gun to the country’s head?

Mr Walker: No. I respect the fact that the hon. Lady has always been consistent in her views on this issue; of course, it is right to point out that those views conflict with the promises made in the last Labour manifesto. This Government are very clear—we want this House to be able to vote on a deal, we think that that deal will be in the interests of our country, and we will bringing that deal back to this House to vote on it.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): After yesterday’s shenanigans and—and let us face it—a total abuse of power by the Executive, all trust in this Government has broken down. So while I believe that the Minister is being sincere, will he, to restore trust, promise to have the Attorney General’s legal advice on section 13 of the withdrawal Act published, and also call for the article 50 clock to be stopped on this process?
Mr Walker: We have been very clear on our interpretation of section 13 of the withdrawal Act. This House will have a vote. We are committed to that meaningful vote in all the circumstances envisaged by section 13 of the withdrawal Act.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister has to understand that the reason why Members on both sides of the House have little faith in what he is saying is that he keeps answering by saying that with section 13 there will be a vote. The reality is that there was a business motion last week where it was agreed that there would be a vote today, and the Government have reneged on it, which is why we do not trust them. The language that he has been using in answering these questions is extremely important. He said that he hopes for a vote before 21 January, that he hopes for a vote shortly, and that 21 January would be the back end of when he would expect there to be a vote. He clearly knows something, so will he set out now when the vote will come?

Mr Walker: I am very honoured that the hon. Gentleman believes I know something. I would encourage him to read the urgent question that I have been responding to.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Government are relying on the House trusting them in bringing forward a meaningful vote in the future, but yesterday’s escapades suggest that they are not always dealing from the top of the pack. The Leader of the House came here yesterday and collapsed the business without making any reference to that at all, and it was moved by a Minister of the Government just shouting “Tomorrow”. It would help to restore some of that trust—although that is a very difficult thing for the Government to do—if they were to promise never to do that again in this process and give this House the opportunity to vote on any future changes in the business motion.

Mr Walker: I would gently say to the hon. Gentleman that he is very generous in giving me such wonderful powers to make commitments on behalf of the Government for evermore. I have been clear today about the meaningful vote that this House will have, and clear about our interpretation of section 13 of the withdrawal Act. I think that colleagues across the House should take that very clearly as the Government’s intention as to what we are going to do. I would therefore gently appeal for the trust that he talks about.
In Canada, Justin Trudeau’s Liberal Government have implemented a new legal, regulated market for cannabis for recreational and medicinal use. Their approach is instructive. In June 2016, the Minister of Justice, the Minister of Public Safety and the Minister of Health jointly set out the key principles that should guide reform, including: protecting young people by keeping cannabis out of the hands of children and youth; keeping profits out of the hands of criminals; preventing people from receiving criminal records for simple cannabis possession offences, which reduces the burden on police and the justice system; protecting public health and safety by strengthening the law with respect to serious offences such as selling cannabis to minors and driving under influence; providing support for addiction treatment, mental health support and education programmes to inform people about the risks; and access to quality-controlled cannabis for medicinal purposes. Surely those principles should guide us too. Carrying on as we are has dreadful consequences.

I want to make four key points. First, nowhere across the world has prohibition worked—cannabis is available everywhere. Secondly, people have no idea what they are buying. We know that leaving supply in the hands of criminals puts teenagers in particular at risk. They are most susceptible to suffering mental health consequences, including psychosis, from regular use of potent strains available on the street. The widespread use of those dangerous strains is the result of our failure to regulate. A regulated market would allow Government to control the safety and potency of cannabis sold by legal vendors. Through a misplaced desire to be “tough on drugs”, we leave teenagers vulnerable to exploitation from sellers who have no interest at all in their welfare. Through inaction, Government and Parliament are culpable. If something is potentially dangerous to children and young people, we must control it and regulate it, not leave it freely available from those keen to make a fast buck.

Thirdly, we know that the illegal market for drugs generates extreme violence in many communities, and particularly the most disadvantaged. If a supplier faces competition, they do not resort to the courts to protect their market; they use extreme violence. Thousands of people have lost their lives as a result of illegal trade in drugs in countries such as Mexico, but on the streets of our poorest communities, violence is meted out regularly. Young vulnerable teenagers get caught up in this violent trade and cannot escape. It does not have to be like this.

Fourthly, we still criminalise thousands of people every year, taking up precious police time that could be used to fight serious crime. Careers are blighted for using a substance that has no doubt many Members on the Government Benches have used at some stage of their lives. Meanwhile, the most harmful drug of all is consumed in large quantities right here in this building. Alcohol leads to violence on our streets and behind closed doors in people’s homes. It destroys families up and down our country, yet we tax it, and the Exchequer benefits enormously from it. Is there not a dreadful hypocrisy in the fact that we allow our drug of choice, while criminalising people who use another, less dangerous drug, many for the relief of pain?

My Bill offers a more rational alternative to this mess. With strict regulation of the growing, sale and marketing of cannabis, with an age limit of 18 for the purchase and consumption of cannabis and with clear controls over potency of what is sold in licensed outlets, we can at last start to protect children and teenagers. We can at last treat with dignity and respect all those who suffer acute pain or who have conditions such as multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s and epilepsy. We can end the shameful treatment of these people as criminals.

We can at last end the extraordinary practice of handing billions of pounds every year to organised crime. We can instead start to tax the sale of cannabis, so that revenues can be used for good purpose—public health education, the NHS, schools and the police. We can start to take some of the violence and intimidation off our streets and restore order in our poorest communities, and we can free up police time to focus on serious crime. This is rational, evidence-based policy making. It is time for this country to act on the evidence and to protect children and young people from harm.
The impact of regular cannabis use on mental health has been well established. There is strong evidence to demonstrate that frequent use of cannabis is linked to the inducement of psychosis. One study in south London revealed a threefold increase in the risk of individuals having a psychotic disorder among regular cannabis users compared with those who do not use cannabis.

In recent years, we have seen a steady reduction in the use of cannabis over the past 20 years, it has declined by 30%. YouGov polling conducted this year indicates that legislation could significantly disturb this overall downward trend. Over a quarter of people under 25 who have never tried cannabis indicated that they would definitely try it, or be likely to try it, if it were legalised. That is over 1 million 18 to 24-year-olds. Of those who have used cannabis before, well over a third of 18 to 24-year-olds said that they would be more likely to use it more regularly if it were decriminalised.

I believe that legislation would send the very wrong message to our young people that cannabis is okay to use. I think we all understand that for many people the use of cannabis is a gateway drug to more serious and more damaging drug use. It would be absolutely wrong to send the message that somehow cannabis is okay, because of where that would lead for many people. As with most laws, the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 is adhered to by the vast majority of people, but it is ignored by some. We must not forget that the current law deters a great many from drug use, which serves a very important public interest.

However, this is no endorsement of the status quo. We all have at least some common ground. It is intolerable to see our young people hurting themselves or ending their lives prematurely because of the effects of this dangerous drug. Our approach must be bolder. We must offer more meaningful support and aim to drive down consumption yet further. This will not be achieved by a new website or a helpline. We need to intervene and challenge, using experts in the field of drug use, recovered addicts and recovering users, who can reach out and offer a real prospect of change for users.

A procedure that replaces the current system of issuing a relatively ineffectual warning or punitive fine given by a police officer with the alternative of offering diversion through attendance at a local drugs awareness day would have a greater impact in reducing use. Part of what is currently charged as a fixed penalty notice could instead go to local treatment providers to pay for such a service.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the situation in Canada. Interestingly, on the eve of the legislation being introduced in Canada, an article published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal called the legislation “a national, uncontrolled experiment in which the profits of cannabis producers and tax revenues are squarely pitched against the health of Canadians.”

Yes, we can learn from experiments taking place elsewhere, but we do not need to risk the lives of some of our most vulnerable residents in doing so.

This is one of the many substances that plague our communities and rob both young and old—and, predominantly, the most disadvantaged—of a full life. We must commit to doing more, to having a person-centric approach, to showing compassion, yet keep the decisiveness of the criminal law in intervening when the public interest demands. I accept that there is a trend in other nations to legalise cannabis, but the evidence at this stage is still very mixed.

Decriminalisation is at best a risky step for us to take. While I understand the desire for something to be done to address this issue, I do not believe that liberalisation in this way is right for our country at this time. We need to do better for our young people, but giving up the war on cannabis is not the way to achieve it. I cannot support this Bill, and if the House does divide on this issue, I will vote against it. I encourage other Members to join me in not allowing this Bill to progress.

**Question put (Standing Order No. 23).**

The House divided: Ayes 52, Noes 66.

Divison No. 275 [1.55 pm]

**AYES**

Antoniazzi, Tonya
Black, Mhairi
Blackman, Kirsty
Blunt, Crispin
Brown, Alan
Burden, Richard
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Edwards, Jonathan
Fabricant, Michael
Farron, Tim
Gethins, Stephen
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goldsmith, Zac
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Hendry, Drew
Herbert, rh Nick
Hobhouse, Wera
Hopkins, Kelvin

**NOES**

Amess, Sir David
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bridgen, Andrew
Bruce, Fiona
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Coyle, Neil
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Double, Steve
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Elphicke, Charlie
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Gapes, Mike
Girvan, Paul
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Graham, Richard
Gray, James
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Hoe, Kate
Hollowbone, Mr Philip
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, rh Mr David
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Mr Chris
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Linden, David
McGinn, Connor
Mills, Nigel
Murray, Ian
Offord, Dr Matthew
Paisley, Ian

Tellers for the Ayes: Tom Brake and Jamie Stone

**AYES**

Jardine, Christine
Jenkyns, Andrea
Kawczynski, Daniel
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Law, Chris
Lucas, Caroline
Mann, Scott
Mc Nally, John
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McGinn, Conor
Moran, Layla
Murray, Ian
Percy, Andrew
Poulter, Dr Dan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Sheppard, Tommy
Stephens, Chris
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williamson, Chris
Wishart, Pete

Tellers for the Noes: Tom Brake and Jamie Stone

**NOES**

Gray, James
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Hoe, Kate
Hollowbone, Mr Philip
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, rh Mr David
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Leslie, Mr Chris
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Linden, David
McGinn, Connor
Mills, Nigel
Murray, Ian
Offord, Dr Matthew
Paisley, Ian
Exiting the European Union: Meaningful Vote

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

2.6 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Prime Minister’s unprecedented decision not to proceed with the final two days of debate and the meaningful vote, despite the House’s Order of Tuesday 4 December 2018, and her failure to allow this House to express its view on the Government’s deal or her proposed negotiating objectives, without the agreement of this House.

I have had the privilege of serving this House for 35 years, and I have had strong disagreements with every Prime Minister who has served in that time—it is all there on the record—but I have never, in all those years, witnessed such an abject mess as this Prime Minister is making of these crucial Brexit negotiations and in presenting her deal to the House. Most Prime Ministers lose votes and get things wrong, but yesterday she demeaned her office by unilaterally taking her discredited deal off the table and running away, rather than facing the verdict of this House. We should have been voting on it today. There is nothing wrong with standing by your principles, but this deal is not one of principle—or apparently not one that she is prepared to stand by, anyway. Yesterday the Government did not even have the decency to allow a vote on withdrawing the business. The Prime Minister let down all MPs and the people we represent, on both sides of this House, the overwhelming majority of whom know that this deal is dead and want to get on with putting a realistic solution in place.

I want to thank my colleagues in the Labour party who supported the application for the debate yesterday, and colleagues in all the other opposition parties who supported it, and indeed Conservative Members, on both sides of the debate, in order to ensure that a vote could take place.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the frequency with which the Government hold this Parliament in contempt, and the ease with which they mislead the British public, is frankly appalling and pathetic? [Interruption.] It is true. It is now alleged on BuzzFeed that the Prime Minister spoke to a number of EU officials that she intended to pull the Brexit vote 24 hours before she told senior Cabinet members. Does my right hon. Friend agree—

Mr Speaker: Order. I had wanted the hon. Gentleman to complete his intervention. I remind the House that interventions should be brief, not mini speeches, because there is a lot to get through and 32 Members want to contribute after the principal speakers.

Jeremy Corbyn: That news is very disturbing indeed. The House should be told first—not the media, not anybody else.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): It is not just BuzzFeed that reported that, but the Daily Mirror. I myself have been told that the Prime Minister spoke to a number of EU member states and
officials before she spoke to the Cabinet and the House to say that the vote would be cancelled. Does my right hon. Friend agree that what I have been told is shocking: that apparently the addendum the Prime Minister is now seeking was drafted weeks ago, before we even started the debate in this House?

Jeremy Corbyn: The whole process gets curiouser and curiouser, Mr Speaker. This is no longer a functioning Government and the Prime Minister must admit her deal is dead. Her shambolic negotiations have ended in failure and she no longer has the authority to negotiate for this country when she does not even have the authority of her own party.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Leader of the Opposition not accept that it is rather strange for the Opposition to criticise the Prime Minister for not seeking clarity on the backstop but then, when she does go to Brussels to do just that, criticise her for that very action?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am absolutely full of admiration for the hon. Member’s ability to keep a straight face while she asked that question.

Parliament may not have had the chance to vote down the Prime Minister’s deal, but if she had put it before the House I think we all know it would have been defeated by a very significant margin indeed.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not just that the Prime Minister let down the House and our constituents? Taxpayers have been paying the price, with reports that £100,000 was spent in the past week on Facebook advertisements supporting her deal. Her Ministers were sent around the country, and all of us have spent time and resources consulting our constituents. We have all been let down. We have not been able to express our view and their view in a vote in this House.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister has indeed wasted £100,000 of public money in just seven days on Facebook adverts trying, and failing, to sell this dog’s dinner of a Brexit deal. There were days when both the Prime Minister and I served as local councillors. Had we spent public money in that way, we would have been surcharged for a waste of public money without proper approval.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is of course right: the Government are absolute shambles. They have failed the country and they are in contempt of Parliament. Will he not do the right thing now and table a motion of no confidence in the Government, so that we can be shot of them?

Jeremy Corbyn: I have tabled this motion today, which the hon. Gentleman supported. We have no confidence in the Government. We need to do the appropriate thing at the appropriate time—have a motion of no confidence to get rid of this Government.

The Prime Minister not only failed to convince the public; she now seems unable to convince the European Union to accept any meaningful changes to her proposals.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): If the right hon. Gentleman followed the debate, he will have noticed that he had complaints about the backstop, as did most of the 164 speakers. Is it therefore not right for the Prime Minister to go and see if she can mend it? If he disagrees with that, why?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thought that was a really valiant attempt to defend the indefensible. It is utterly ludicrous. Everyone knew the date the vote was going to be put. The whole world knew about it. We now hear that apparently the Prime Minister was trying to arrange some backroom deal ahead of it and then pulled the vote, but she did not bother to tell an awful lot of other people that she was doing so. I do admire the right hon. and learned Gentleman’s attempts at defending what is completely indefensible.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): Last week the Government were found to be in contempt of Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the media were briefed before this House, that is further contempt for this Parliament?

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister cancelled the Cabinet meeting this morning—presumably she is worried about whether she has a majority there or not—and apparently many of her Ministers are very upset. I cannot say I blame them. At least a dozen were sent into TV and radio stations yesterday morning to deny the Prime Minister would pull the vote, before somebody helpfully phoned from Downing Street to pull them out of the studios to say the line had changed. That is an extraordinary way of not running a Government. The Northern Ireland Secretary was quoted as saying that the UK must move on with Brexit or risk being riven with division, shortly before the Prime Minister decided not to move on with Brexit. This is the same Prime Minister who said hers was the best deal and the only deal. If that is the case, what is she doing today in Europe?

This runaway Prime Minister is not even seeking to negotiate. She confirmed that she is only seeking reassurances. Our Prime Minister is tripping around the continent in pursuit and search of warm words—when she can get out of the car to hear them. It really is, if I may say so, Mr Speaker, the unspeakable in pursuit of the unwritten—a waste of time and a waste of public money. Because of her own unworkable red lines, the European Commission says it will not renegotiate with her. The Prime Minister also concedes that she is not negotiating either, so what on earth is she doing travelling from capital to capital in Europe? I am sure it cannot be Christmas shopping, so what on earth is she doing in Europe? Worse than that, it shows that once again she is simply not listening.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): In ensuring the integrity of our Union, does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the only way we can deal with the backstop is to amend the legally binding text of an international agreement?

Jeremy Corbyn: The red lines the Prime Minister set out on the backstop became impossible. Because of her bungled negotiations, there is a greater chance of entering
into an indefinite backstop. That is one of the reasons why we would vote against it, as I believe the hon. Gentleman would.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): There are legitimate concerns about the Northern Ireland backstop, but does my right hon. Friend agree that it is not only the backstop that is a problem with this deal? Can he remember a time in British history when the Prime Minister and the Chancellor recommended a course of action that, like their deal, would make people worse off according to their own analysis?

Jeremy Corbyn: I cannot recall a time when any Government have come to the House to promise something that will make people worse off and then blindly continue to go ahead with it. It is not only the backstop that is a problem. Many will not vote for a blindfold Brexit on the basis of a 26-page wish list attached to it. It fails to guarantee the frictionless trade that the Prime Minister promised. It fails to maintain our membership of vital agencies and programmes. It fails to ensure that our rights and protections will be kept in place. It fails to provide a comprehensive customs union with a UK say. On the latter point, I welcome the endorsement of a permanent customs union by former Brexit Minister Lord Bridges, who said that it could be the basis for a parliamentary consensus.

Yesterday, following her statement, the Prime Minister failed to answer a single one of my questions, so last night I wrote to her, together with the leaders of the Scottish National party, Plaid Cymru, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. We set out five questions to the Prime Minister. Sadly, she is not here to answer them. Therefore, Mr Speaker, when she returns from her strange stage-managed foray to Europe, I hope she will reply promptly to the five Opposition parties who wrote to her.

While the Prime Minister sends our country into Brexit-induced paralysis, the coming winter threatens the deepest crisis in our NHS. Homelessness and rough sleeping continue their unrelenting rise. The local government funding settlement is delayed yet again, meaning our very hard-hit councils cannot start budgeting for next year and neither can the police—facing rising violent crime because their funding settlement is delayed, too. Another Government contractor, we learn, is at risk, and thousands of jobs, too, as Interserve teeters on the brink of collapse; and all the while, the economy is slowing—high streets in crisis, shares tumbling, the pound plummeting. This is not strong and stable growth. It is weak leadership from a weak Prime Minister.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Some people say that talk of poverty and food banks is a distraction from Brexit. Given the impact on food prices, does not my right hon. Friend think that actually, it is the central issue?

Jeremy Corbyn: Poverty is the central issue in this country. As the UN report pointed out, 14 million of our fellow citizens are living in poverty. More will be rough sleepers than for many, many years over this Christmas, and we have hundreds of thousands of children living in insecure, temporary accommodation, many of them very hungry over this Christmas. That is not a good look and we should be having a Government who are concentrated on reducing the levels of poverty in this country.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the £100,000 given to Facebook—spent on Brexit advertising—by the Government could have been given to all our constituents to alleviate food poverty?

Jeremy Corbyn: Indeed; £100,000 would help a lot of food banks get more food in order that the hungry can get something to eat.

If the Prime Minister comes back with nothing more than warm words, then she must immediately put her deal to the House—no more delays, no more tricks; let Parliament take control. If not, then frankly she must go. We cannot tolerate delay any longer. With a legally enshrined exit date of 29 March 2019, just over 100 days away, we cannot allow this shambles to endure, and neither can we risk falling into a no deal.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): In addition to the farce that was facing the country yesterday, one of the biggest consequences will be the impact that this has on the 22,000 EU nationals living in my constituency. The settled scheme status is still being developed. The Home Office app for registration has been branded absolutely “useless” by academics. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the limbo facing this House will have great, distressing consequences for our EU nationals in our constituencies?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and compliment her on the work that she does on behalf of her constituents. All of us represent EU nationals, some in greater numbers than others. We all know the horror and stress that they have been through over the past two and a half years—the stress where one partner comes from one part of Europe and the other from Britain, and the stress on those children is huge—which is why, straight after the referendum, on our behalf, Andy Burnham moved from this Dispatch Box a motion guaranteeing permanent rights of residence for all EU nationals. That was agreed on a non-binding motion. Two and a half years later, we still have not had the absolute legal certainty from this Government on the protection of those EU nationals. They deserve it, and we also need to recognise that they have made a massive contribution to our economy, to our way of life, to our health service and to all our public services. We should thank them for it and assure them that they have a permanent place in this country, whatever the outcome of these particular rounds of talks.

We will work across this House to prevent any further damage to our economy, to our international standing and to our democracy, so I say to the limited number of Government Back Benchers opposite: let Parliament have a say on this shabby deal. Let Parliament take back
control of it, because this Government have lost the ability to lead, the ability to negotiate and the ability to speak for this House in those negotiations.

2.24 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Leader of the Opposition spent most of his speech attacking my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. I think it is perhaps worth reminding him and the House that in the last two months alone, my right hon. Friend has spent more than 22 hours at this Dispatch Box making statements and answering questions from right hon. and hon. Members in every corner of this House, predominantly about the question of EU exit—and the deal that she negotiated. She has made, in that time alone, six full oral statements dedicated to that subject and opened the debate in this House on 4 December—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. There will be plenty of opportunity for other hon. and right hon. Members to speak in the debate, and indeed, to seek to intervene, but the Minister for the Cabinet Office must be heard.

Mr Lidington: I think anybody who has observed my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in action, both in her current office and in the other offices she has held over the years, will be in no doubt about her commitment to parliamentary accountability, whatever the cost to her in terms of the time that you, Mr Speaker, rightly say that she should be spending—and she accepts that she should spend—in answering questions from colleagues in every party in every corner of this House.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I think that nobody doubts how much effort the Prime Minister has put into the entire process of Brexit, but in the end, what matters to people outside here is not effort but results. This House ought to have the chance to vote on those results.

Mr Lidington: As I shall say shortly, this House will indeed have that opportunity.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): After all the debate, what the businesses, farmers and consumers—all the people in my constituency—want to know is when this matter is going to be resolved. It would have been resolved tonight had we had that vote. What date will we have this vote?

Mr Lidington: What the businesses and farmers whom I have talked to in Wales, and in my constituency and many other parts of the country, have said is that they want hon. Members from every political party to get behind the deal and get it in place as rapidly as possible, so that they can have the certainty and clarity of the transitional period and can plan investment and job creation decisions that are currently being held while that uncertainty prevails.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that, while the Prime Minister may have had plenty of time to speak about this, we have not? We did have 15 hours of debate in which we could have presented the case for our constituents—for me, that includes the university sector, the automobile sector and the science sector. Two Ministers have gone who used to cover those portfolios because they can now see the effect that this is going to have. Does he not understand the intense frustration on the Opposition side with this Government, who will not let us speak up for our constituents?

Mr Lidington: For the reasons that I have already set out, there have been many hours already, including the three days so far of debate on the meaningful vote, in which Members of Parliament from all parts of the House have been able to express those views.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I will give way to the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), from the Scottish National party, then I will make progress.

Pete Wishart: It is always good to see the right hon. Gentleman at the Dispatch Box, but perhaps he can explain exactly what the Prime Minister is doing. She has heard what the EU leaders have told us; they are not prepared to negotiate this deal. Should not this Prime Minister, the worst dancing queen in history, come back here and face her Waterloo?

Mr Lidington: Ah, the hon. Gentleman has been crafting that one for quite a time, I can see. He asked what my right hon. Friend is doing. The answer is that she is responding to the points made to her again and again by Members of this House, because in the statements and the exchanges that followed, and in the debates that we have had so far, hon. Members have expressed criticisms, usually focused—not exclusively, but for the most part—on one issue: the so-called backstop on the Irish border. Again and again, right hon. and hon. Members in all parts of the House have asked her to go back to EU member states and the Commission to seek changes, and in particular, to provide assurances that the backstop would only be temporary. That is exactly what my right hon. Friend has done.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It was very clear from the first three days of debate—colleagues have not been backwards in making themselves available to the media as well to say how much they disagree with the deal—that the House was not going to pass it, so surely the Prime Minister has done exactly the right thing in going back to Europe to get a better deal to put to the House in due course.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend puts it well. As I have said, the Prime Minister is responding to the wish expressed by many Members of the House.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman and I both entered the House at the same time, and I doubt that either of us has been in a situation quite as dangerous and fraught as this. Surely he will agree that, after yesterday, the Prime Minister has shredded her credibility and that many people on both sides of the House now find it almost impossible to believe a word she says. She asserts one thing one day and the opposite the day after. She sends her Cabinet out to assert that the vote is going ahead even as she is planning to pull it. Surely he must understand that we cannot go on with this Prime Minister at the helm.
Mr Lidington: No, I reject that completely. Let us look back over the last week. My right hon. Friend convened the G20 in Argentina the Sunday before last; she gave a statement to the House on the Monday; then she both led the debate on the meaningful vote and listened to the many interventions made; and then, as well as paying attention to what was said in the House on subsequent days, she talked to a number of Members from different political parties and came to the decision over the weekend that she announced to the House yesterday.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): Is the problem not now that Ministers do not know themselves whether they are telling the truth to the House of Commons because they are not being told the truth by the Prime Minister? This is now a question of trust, and that is why the DUP is not supporting the Government. It is not just a question of policy detail; it is a question of breaking trust. Ministers do not even know any more when they are telling the truth.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend convened the Cabinet by telephone conference yesterday morning to tell all members of the Cabinet about the decision she had come to, and the Cabinet agreed to support and endorse that decision.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that Members had asked for assurances about the backstop. Will he accept, even at this late stage, that assurances will not suffice? Unless there is a fundamental alteration to the text of the withdrawal agreement and to the advice given by the Attorney General himself, it simply will not suffice.

Mr Lidington: I am in no doubt about the view expressed by the hon. Gentleman and his DUP colleagues. He will understand that I am not going to prejudge the outcome of the conversations the Prime Minister is having with other European leaders, but she made it clear yesterday that nothing was ruled out in those conversations.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the deputy Prime Minister agree that had we had the vote today, he would have known the views not of a few Members but of the House? Would that not have strengthened the Prime Minister’s negotiating position, as she could have gone back and said that the House had rejected the proposal?

Mr Lidington: As she said yesterday, the Prime Minister was in no doubt, having listened to the debate, read _Hansard_ and held direct conversations with Members of Parliament across the House, as to what the outcome was going to be.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): It seems to me that we have two options—either a Parliament like the European Parliament, where everything is agreed in advance and what someone says in the Chamber does not affect anybody’s opinion or change anything, or a Parliament like this Parliament, where debate is dynamic and Ministers listen to what is said. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a better place to be?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) reminded us that she and I had been here for a few years now. I have sat through exchange after exchange in this Chamber—with each main party, at different times, in opposition or in government—where the demand has been that Ministers respond to the debate in the House and the calls made upon them, yet when my right hon. Friend does that, the clamour of criticism increases further.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Lidington: No, I will not give way. [HON. MEMBERS: “Give way!”]

Mr Speaker: Order. An enormous amount of noisy burbling is being directed at the Minister by right hon. and hon. Members. I have known him for 21 years in the House, and for a decade or so before that, and in my experience he is an unfailingly courteous Minister, and he must be heard.

Mr Lidington: I have given way a fair number of times. I am conscious that many of my hon. Friends, and many hon. Members opposite, are seeking to intervene, and I will try to give way further, but I am conscious, Mr Speaker, that you told us that more than 30 Members wanted to take part in this debate. I will therefore make some progress, and then I will look for an opportunity to give way again.

The right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition and many other Members on both sides of the House have made the point that the House wishes to bring this matter to a head and to have a definitive vote, and of course it is a requirement under the EU withdrawal Act that a meaningful vote take place before the Government are able to ratify any deal with the EU—a deal in the form of a withdrawal agreement under article 50 of the treaty on European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I want to reiterate what I think the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), made clear earlier this afternoon: the remaining stages of this debate and the votes have not been cancelled; they have been deferred. The business of the House motion that governs the debate, including the amendment successfully moved by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), also remains in force. The terms of that business of the House motion could be changed only if the House itself either amended the motion or passed a new motion to supersede the one currently in place.

Mr Francois: My procedure is a bit rusty, but am I right in saying that the motion as drafted can be amended only by a Minister of the Crown? If the Government wanted to put back the vote because the Prime Minister wanted more time to go to Europe—admittedly, she has only had two years—the honourable thing the Government should have done yesterday was come to the House, table a revised business motion to put the vote back, say, one week, argue to the House why they needed that extra time, and then put the motion to the vote. That would have been the honourable way to proceed. Why did the Government not do that?

Mr Lidington: While it might be for the Government to table any amendment to the business of the House motion, of course such an amendment would carry only if the House as a whole voted to approve it.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Francois: Will my right hon. Friend give way again?

Mr Lidington: If my right hon. Friend will forgive me, I will try to answer his question.

Mr Francois: We cannot vote on it if you don’t bring it forward.

Mr Lidington: I am trying to answer my right hon. Friend’s question. Just as the business of the House motion that currently governs the debate was open for debate and was then approved by the House in order for it to take effect, those provisions would also apply to any subsequent change in the terms of that motion, so it would be a matter for the House as a whole.

As for my right hon. Friend’s second point, we do not know for certain at this stage what the outcome of the talks that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is having today with other European leaders will be, or what the discussions and conclusions may be of the European Council that is scheduled to take place later this week. The judgment that we have made as a Government is that in those circumstances, it would be right to come to the House as soon as we have that certainty.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I want to make it clear that, as the Prime Minister said yesterday and as the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), said earlier today in response to the urgent question, the Government will bring the debate and vote back to the House by 21 January at the very latest. As my hon. Friend said during the exchanges that followed his response to the urgent question, we see that date as a deadline and not as a target.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I will give way to the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), because he has been trying to intervene for a long time.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for giving way. As he knows, I have a lot of respect for him, and he has a tough gig today.

The reason for this postponement and delay is, of course, so that the Prime Minister can go away and negotiate some magic piece of paper. Can the right hon. Gentleman tell me whether any member of the Cabinet had seen or discussed a draft of the addendum or codicil that the Prime Minister is seeking at any point in the last few weeks before she decided to postpone the debate?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s kind words, but, as he will understand, I am certainly not going to talk about the discussions that take place during Cabinet meetings.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am slightly confused by what the deputy Prime Minister is saying. He seems to be suggesting that we will be restarting the old debate. Presumably that means that none of the Members who have already spoken will speak again and that all the elements of the business of the House motion that we have already carried will continue; but surely to God, we must do that before Christmas. We cannot let this roll on and on while businesses are wasting time, money and energy making plans for something that may not come to pass.

Mr Lidington: I will go this far with the hon. Gentleman: my view, and the Government’s view, is that we need to push on with this sooner rather than later, but that we need to know the outcome of the discussions that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is having before we determine the exact timing of those future days of debate. Let me also reiterate that, as both the Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester have said to the House, the Government regard the obligation, in the event of no deal being agreed, to make a statement in line with section 13 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act as a solemn commitment that still stands.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that greater than the political crisis that has been created is the economic crisis? Already, in the last 24 hours, 2% has been knocked off the value of the pound. Is that not a reason to press ahead with the vote?

Mr Lidington: I am second to no one in wanting this issue to be resolved as rapidly as possible.

Emma Reynolds: Why will the Government not rule out no deal, given the catastrophic impact that it would have on businesses, jobs and people’s livelihoods? If he will not rule it out, will he tell us how much more taxpayers’ money is going into planning for no deal because of the delay that has been caused by the Government and the lack of a vote today?

Mr Lidington: It cannot be ruled out, because the removal of no deal from the table requires the ratification of a deal of some kind at Westminster, and it requires ratification by the European Parliament as well. Just as any business would expect to maintain contingency plans for all eventualities, even unwelcome and unlikely ones, the Government have a responsibility to maintain their contingency planning against that eventuality.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The truth is that this is not an isolated incident but a pattern of behaviour. Parliament has been frustrated and blocked at every turn. Whether the issue was the role that Parliament would take in the debate and deliberations, the legal advice that we consider in making that decision or our having a vote at all, Parliament has been frustrated at every step. If there is to be a continuation of the debate that has already taken place, it will mean that whatever change is made and whatever format is adopted, I will not be able to debate it on behalf of my constituents, because I took part in the debate last week. How can that be right and fair?

Mr Lidington: As I have said, the Government, and the Prime Minister personally, have been extremely committed to this, which can be demonstrated by the number of hours that have been spent in Parliament discussing these issues and responding to questions.
Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): We have heard a lot from Opposition Members about the value of the pound. Some of them are becoming quite interested in economics all of a sudden. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that one reason why the value of the pound has been falling is the snuff of a Labour Government, which would see capital flight from this country as we have never seen it before? Even the snuff of it is a foretaste of what would happen if the Leader of the Opposition ever got his hands on No. 10.

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is right, and he is not the only one to express that fear. It is an opinion voiced strongly by businesses large and small in every part of the United Kingdom. The thought of a Labour Government who saw the economic policies of Cuba and Venezuela as models to follow should scare anyone who is interested in jobs and investment in this country.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman has been asked this question twice, but he has not answered it. I will give him a third chance. Is the Government’s proposition that when we return to this, the previous debate will continue—in other words, there will be two more days and then we will have a vote—or is there to be a fresh debate? Which is it going to be?

Mr Lidington: It is a fair question, and while I am not able to give the right hon. Gentleman an absolutely clear answer, I genuinely want to be as helpful as I can on this point. The default position is that the current arrangements, including the business of the House motion, remain in place. One of the things that the Government will have to determine, depending on the outcome of the European Council and the discussions that the Prime Minister is having, is whether, in the context of the statutory requirement for the Government to hold a meaningful vote under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, any changes that may have been made are of a character that requires the debate to be started from scratch rather than continued. Until we know the outcome of those talks, it is impossible for me to provide greater clarity, but I hope the right hon. Gentleman will accept from me that that is the best answer I can give in trying to be straight with him.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. He is being extremely generous with his time. Can he confirm that, because the vote has now been deferred, the immigration White Paper very soon.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Lidington: I will give way to the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry), but then I will make some progress.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman—he is being very generous. A moment ago, he said that the only way to take the risk of no deal off the table was to ratify the deal. I know that he is a very honest man. Surely he must acknowledge that there is a third way as a result of yesterday’s decision by the European Court of Justice, namely to revoke the article 50 notice. He may not wish to do that, but surely he will acknowledge that theoretically it is a third way to avoid the possibility of no deal.

Mr Lidington: The hon. and learned Lady is right: in the wake of the court’s decision, that is a legal and constitutional possibility. But the Prime Minister made it clear again yesterday that it is not the Government’s policy, and indeed not just my party but the Labour party committed last year to respect the result of the 2016 referendum.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): While this debate is interesting, it is ultimately futile in having an impact on public policy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that if the Leader of the Opposition really believes things to be as bad and rotten as Labour says they are, it is surprising that we are not here today debating a vote of no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government, rather than faffing around with a Standing Order No. 24 debate?

Mr Lidington: That is a very reasonable question, but it is not for me to answer it; as I understand it, the Leader of the Opposition has the right to respond briefly at the conclusion of this debate, and he might well seize the opportunity to give his own answer.

When the debate and vote come back to this House, the whole House will have to face up to some choices, because the decision in 2016 that this country should leave the EU has consequences. The idea, which still persists in some circles, that we can have all of the benefits of EU membership without accepting the obligations that go with it is a fantasy. Hon. Members in all parts of the House need to face up to that, and I suggest that it is a truth known to any Opposition Member who has either negotiated within the EU while serving as a Minister or worked for one of the European institutions.

When the Leader of the Opposition responds to this debate, I hope he will use the opportunity to explain in greater detail something about his own position. At the moment he asserts that he wishes for a comprehensive and permanent customs union between this country and the EU, with a British say in future trade deals—a wish that, however desirable, cuts across central elements of the European treaties, most notably the common commercial policy. He asserts that we should use the transitional period to renegotiate the deal, dismissing the reality that the transitional period does not exist unless and until the deal has been ratified.

The right hon. Gentleman says he would solve the issue of the backstop with a customs union for the whole of the United Kingdom, disregarding the fact that that would not solve it because the need for common regulatory standards would remain. He argues that we should have a comprehensive free trade agreement with the EU without any commitment to EU state aid rules, but member states and the Commission could not have been clearer that that runs contrary to the most fundamental principles of the European treaties and of the practice and policy of successive Councils and Commissions over the years.
Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes a powerful point. I think it needs to be recorded that if any Member of this House deserves the highest recognition of all, it is the Prime Minister, because she has consistently come to the Dispatch Box and made his case eloquently and powerfully. I gently say to him, however, that he is right that we need to be honest about the choices our country faces, but the problem is that we are only having that debate now, at the end of the process, instead of at the beginning. I remind him of the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), who said from the Dispatch Box two years ago when he was Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union that he was confident he would negotiate a deal that would convey the “exact same benefits” that we currently enjoy as a member of the single market and customs union. That is the problem: too many broken promises, too many promises that cannot be delivered.

Mr Lidington: That is why, when the House comes to debate these matters again and vote on them, every Member, whichever side of the House they sit on and whichever party or part of the country they represent, must be aware that if they vote to reject the deal the Prime Minister has negotiated, they will also need to judge what alternative would both be negotiable with the EU and command a majority here.

I have to say that colleagues of mine and Opposition Members who have expressed strong views on European matters need to understand some home truths. Some have urged that we should simply press ahead, leave without any deal and move straightforwardly to WTO terms. Hon. Members attracted by that option, perhaps on grounds of sovereignty, need to weigh the political attractiveness to them of that option against the fact that trade on WTO terms would do serious harm to our automotive, aerospace and agricultural sectors among others, and that at worst a sudden severing of preferential trade access in less than four months’ time would be hugely disruptive and harmful to our economy, with a direct cost in jobs and investment.

Those who advocate, by contrast, a different model for our future relations, whether Norway and the customs union or a Canada-style classic free trade agreement with the EU, have to address the reality that a withdrawal agreement covering citizens’ rights, a financial settlement and the question of the Irish border is an unavoidable gateway to negotiations on any of those outcomes. Because there will be a risk, whether large or small, of a gap between the end of the transitional period and the new partnership coming into effect, a backstop—an insurance policy of some kind for the Irish border—will also be an unavoidable part of such a withdrawal agreement.

Then there are those who urge a second referendum in the hope of reversing the decision of 2016. I have come to terms with the decision the people took, although I think the whole House knows that I hugely regretted it at the time. Those who champion a second referendum have to confront the fact that such an outcome would certainly be divisive but could not guarantee to be decisive in ending this debate. Further still, colleagues who champion that approach should not underestimate the damage that would be done to what is already fragile public confidence in our democratic institutions.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is determined to do everything in her power to secure the safeguards and assurances for which so many right hon. and hon. Members have called, and, at every step in these negotiations, she is motivated by the national interest and by nothing else.

When we know the outcome of the talks now under way, the Government will bring the debate and the decision back to Parliament. At that point not only the Government but the House—every Member here—will have to confront the hard but inescapable choices that face our country today.

2.59 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington). Those 35 minutes were a valiant attempt to defend the indefensible. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) on securing this necessary debate. What we witnessed yesterday was an act of pathetic cowardice by the Prime Minister. She is more focused on saving her own job and her own party than on doing what is right for Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom. She is a Prime Minister who is intent on railroad through a deal that will make people poorer. She promised that she would take back control, but this is a Government who are out of control. They are out of their depth and increasingly running out of time.

Back in 2014, Scotland was promised the strength and security of the United Kingdom, but instead we have been treated with contempt and left with a Westminster Government in chaos and crisis. The Prime Minister promised an equal partnership, but instead she has silenced and sidelined the will of the Scottish people, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. Last week, this Government were found to be in contempt of Parliament. Yesterday, the Prime Minister proved that her Government had no respect for Members of this place and continued to show her utter contempt for Parliament as she pulled the meaningful vote from beneath our feet. Why did she do this?

This Prime Minister has denied Parliament the right to debate and vote on her deal because she knows something that we knew weeks ago—namely, that her deal is dead in the water. It is a non-starter. She has lost the confidence of those on her own Benches. Today, we should have voted on the Government’s motion, voting down the Prime Minister’s deal and signalling that this House had no appetite for it. That would have allowed Parliament to move on, and to make the point that there are alternatives to the Prime Minister’s plans and that we could stay in the European Union, particularly given the fact that all the scenarios in the UK Government’s own analysis show that we will always be worse off with Brexit. Instead, we have a Prime Minister who has shown her contempt of Parliament. Our right to vote down her plans have been removed on the whim of the Prime Minister. Where is the parliamentary democracy that we hear about? The decision that Parliament voted for to have a meaningful vote has been withdrawn on the say-so of the Prime Minister, but we do not live in a dictatorship.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): The right hon. Gentleman’s constituents, like mine, view these proceedings with amazed misunderstanding.
and shock. Does he agree that the failure to hold the vote today, and the continuing delay in getting a vote, are dangerous for this institution and its standing? Let me go slightly further and suggest that this is also dangerous for the proper working of democracy in the UK.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I know that many businesses throughout the highlands and islands are saying that they are particularly worried about their ability to attract labour. We benefit from the free movement of people, and the economic prosperity of the highlands of Scotland has been endangered by the wilful actions of this Government.

Seema Malhotra: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that yesterday’s decision by the Prime Minister impacted not only on this House but on the markets and our economy? Investors have said that the pound experienced its worst day since the 2016 referendum, and that the Government had “left investors completely in the dark about what happens next”. Others went on to say that the delay was “kicking the can further down the road”, and that “we would not be surprised if Brexit uncertainty—which we estimate has knocked 0.5 percentage points off growth since the referendum—starts to weigh more heavily on the economy.” We can take this directly to the Prime Minister’s door.

Ian Blackford: I have to say to the hon. Lady that we should reflect carefully on what has happened over the past two and a half years. The pound fell right after the Brexit referendum, and it has been under pressure ever since. We know that the UK has fallen to the bottom of the G7 growth league over the course of the last couple of years, and that inflation has been higher. We also know that there has been an impact on people’s pockets, and that households are already an average of £600 worse off as a consequence. Each and every one of us has a responsibility to take the right actions to deliver sustainable economic growth. When the Government know, from each piece of analysis that they have conducted for all the scenarios, that people are going to be poorer under Brexit, they have a responsibility to be honest with people about the risks involved.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I commend my right hon. Friend for his powerful speech. Does he agree that the most disgraceful and despicable thing about what the Prime Minister has done by interrupting our consideration of her plans is that yet again she has endangered by the wilful actions of this Government. What has taken place over the past few weeks. We have a Prime Minister who inadvertently misled Parliament, who has been found in contempt of Parliament and who has snatched away Parliament’s right to vote, silencing our voices to save herself from the shackles of defeat.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I want to make some progress, because I am aware that many people want to speak.

The Prime Minister should not have the ability simply to halt proceedings in the middle of a five-day debate. Our constituents and the rest of the world must be looking on aghast at what took place here yesterday. We now know that we might not get to vote on these substantive matters until 21 January—the last conceivable date for such a vote. The Prime Minister is trying to make this a binary choice between her deal and no deal. That is unacceptable and this House cannot let that happen. The Prime Minister cannot succeed. This is a complete dereliction of duty. Running scared from the truth, this Government have backed themselves into a corner and are refusing to take a road out. The Scottish National party has been firm: our position is that we want to remain in the European Union. We want to continue to enjoy the socio-economic benefits of working in partnership with nations right across the continent. We respect the fact that England and Wales voted to leave the European Union, but we ask the Government to respect the fact that Scotland did not.

It is now more notable than ever that this Government do not care about respecting the will of the people of Scotland. They do not care that £1,600 will be lost from the pockets of people across our country, that 80,000 jobs will be put at risk, or that our businesses, farmers and fishermen will be put at a differential disadvantage. The Tories think they can do whatever they want with Scotland and get away with it. Had the SNP been able to vote on the Prime Minister’s deal today, we would have voted it down. This deal will rob our country not just of economic opportunity but of stability. We in the SNP cannot countenance that. I want to put the Prime Minister on notice that the SNP will not, today or any other day, back her deal or any other deal that makes Scotland poorer.

While the Prime Minister travels around Europe today, she will be scrambling for fluff, for padding and for eloquent phrasing to appease those in her own party who are anxious about parliamentary sovereignty. They are not anxious about the economic future of the nations and regions of the UK. This is still a Tory battle of ideological motivations. Two years down the road, the Tories are sleepwalking into the abyss. They are fighting among themselves, distracted by rhetoric and avoiding reality. Fuelled by a desire to win the hearts and minds of her colleagues, the Prime Minister focuses her efforts on uniting her divided party rather than on protecting the rights and livelihoods of citizens across the country. This is an absolute mess, and the stakes are high.

Let us not lose sight of what is at risk. The eyes of the world are on this place. World leaders, our constituents, businesses and others watch on, holding their heads in their hands. It is incumbent on us all—each Member of Parliament here today—to recognise the severity of what has taken place over the past few weeks. We have a Prime Minister who inadvertently misled Parliament, who has been found in contempt of Parliament and who has snatched away Parliament’s right to vote, silencing our voices to save herself from the shackles of defeat.
Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman accuses the Prime Minister of ignoring Parliament. Yet has not she done the opposite? She has listened to the views expressed across the House, heard that there is disagreement with the proposed deal and therefore gone away to try to change it. She has listened to and respected, not ignored the House.

Ian Blackford: I am almost lost for words. The hon. Gentleman does not accept that the House voted for a meaningful vote, the Government introduced the timetable for it, yet the Prime Minister disrespected Parliament.

We have reached a critical point. It is crystal clear that the Prime Minister is focused on running down the clock. Rather than buying time, she wants to run out of time. Her strategy now seems to be to present a binary option—her deal or no deal. That is not the case before us. Let me be clear: the Prime Minister has options, but she will not take them. She has checked out of listening mode. Despite facing resounding defeat, she is burying her head in the sand. We cannot let her. We cannot stand for this treatment. The Government cannot be allowed to treat this place with contempt.

That is why I wrote to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), alongside Plaid Cymru, Liberal Democrat and Green colleagues, to urge him to table a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister. I say respectfully to the right hon. Gentleman that he will have our support if he tables a vote of no confidence. It is time for this Prime Minister to go. This is a time not for floundering, but for leadership. The Prime Minister has shown nothing but contempt.

We need answers. When will the House get to vote on the deal? Yesterday, the Prime Minister offered no assurances on the timeline. If her plan is to run this to the wire, to take all other options off the table and rob Parliament of its say, she should be ashamed of herself.

Today’s Treasury Committee report expressed disappointment that the Government’s analysis did not model the deal. It also affirms that UK firms have no sympathy for a Government too frightened to put their deal to a vote, despite the fact that UK firms lost 2% of their value yesterday with the pound’s fall. Business is losing faith. The Prime Minister has put us in an economically and constitutionally unsustainable position. The SNP will not stand by while the clock ticks down.

We will not allow the Prime Minister a free hand to reduce our options to a binary choice. Parliament cannot allow that. We must now take back control. It is time for the Prime Minister to move aside and let Parliament lead or let the people decide.

I say respectfully to the Leader of the Opposition that we want to work with him. We have a choice to put this matter above party politics, bring it to an end and bring this shambolic Government to an end with a motion of no confidence.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I must advise the House that no fewer than 31 hon. Members have indicated a wish to catch my eye in this relatively short debate. In consequence of that level of demand, there will have to be a four-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches with immediate effect. I am sorry, but that is the way it is.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It is a measure of a person, a Government, or a Parliament how they deal with a crisis. I will leave the Government to one side. Parliament needs to think carefully about how we are seen in the midst of this serious situation. As I said two weeks ago, it is easy to criticise somebody else’s deal and stay entrenched in the positions that we have held over the past two years. I heard what the Minister for the Cabinet Office said about moving his position and I have done the same: I wanted to remain in the EU, but that was not the result of the vote; it was not how people in this country voted in 2016. We can carry on rerunning the same debates or work out how to build a consensus, move forward as a Parliament and set an example to the country.

We should be clear about how this House is seen. I cannot be the only Member who has had said to them in the past 24 to 48 hours, “If you lot can’t sort this out, you have no right to be there at all.” That will come back to bite us all at the next general election, regardless of the positions we have taken on the matter. It is easy to say, as the motion does, that this House wants a vote, but we need to be clear about what we would do with it.

It is obvious that the main position in the House is that we do not want no deal. However, for that to happen, we need something else to put on the table for this House to approve. I am glad that the Treasury Committee report, which was published today, has been mentioned. There is no time to go into it, but the economic damage that no deal would cause is clear.

It is also obvious that parliamentary opinion must be tested sooner rather than later. The main frustration to Members of all parties with yesterday’s decision is that that test has been put off. Members of Parliament have to be more aware of the broader views than our constituents. It is inevitable that those who voted in 2016 or in a general election vote according to what is right for them and their families. Why would they do anything else? However, Members of Parliament cannot vote in Divisions solely on the basis of what we think. We have to think as representatives of our constituents.

Clearly, there are three main views, at least in my constituency: reject the deal and have a second vote; reject the deal and either renegotiate or accept no deal; or support the Prime Minister’s draft agreement. The Leader of the Opposition said, “We will work across the House.” What does that mean? The leader of the SNP has basically just said the same thing. What does he mean by that? The time for talking is over; the time for action by Members to avoid no deal is here.

I do not know how we test parliamentary opinion if we do not have a vote. Perhaps we need to set up a special Select Committee of senior Members of Parliament to hammer out what we mean. Perhaps it is time for some sort of Government of national unity. Perhaps it is time for a free vote on the deal, avoiding the usual party political constraints.

However, I do know that with 108 days to go until this country leaves the EU, if the Government cannot sort out this matter of great national importance, Parliament must step in, stop posturing and get down to work to hammer out a deal.
3.17 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Yesterday was undoubtedly a day of humiliation for the Government, but from today, we have a different task, which is to avoid humiliation for the nation. We will have to see what the Prime Minister brings back from her talks, but I doubt whether any piece of paper, any codicil or any exchange of letters will save the current withdrawal agreement and political declaration from defeat here. In those circumstances—the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) drew attention to this—there are broadly two choices. The first is that the Government abandon their red lines and apply to join the European economic area and a customs union. That would solve the problem with Northern Ireland, ensure the continuation of friction-free trade, give us many things that are mere aspirations in the political declaration and provide reassurance to businesses, but there would be consequences, including in relation to free movement.

The second option is to put the question back to the people. That could include the Prime Minister putting her withdrawal agreement to the people in a vote. We would need legislation for that and therefore Parliament would have to decide what the questions are. Let us be frank: that is not without difficulty or risk. What would the question or questions be? If there were more than two, what voting method would be used? How could another referendum command legitimacy? It seems clear that we would get to that point only if all other options had been tried and exhausted.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, whichever path we end up going down, the first stage should be to rule out no deal, which would be deeply damaging to manufacturing industries, to exports and to our police and security co-operation?

Hilary Benn: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, and I was just coming to that point. There are two other tasks that we now have to face. One is that we will have to apply for an extension of article 50, because if either of those two courses of action is pursued by the Government, or by the House in the absence of Government leadership, we will require more time.

Secondly, we must address, as the very first thing, the point my right hon. Friend has just raised, which is to make it clear that we will not leave the European Union without an agreement, because the Government say it would be chaotic and damaging. I do not believe that any Government would be so irresponsible as to take us out of the EU without an agreement, and I do not think Parliament would allow it to happen, so why should we carry on pretending that it might happen? The sooner we take it off the table, the better it will be, above all, for businesses that watch this mess and say, “We would just forget about the money.”

3.23 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I will return to one or two of the points raised by the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn).

To overcome the present paralysis, we must all face some truths that perhaps even a majority of the House are finding difficult to face. I would have voted against the withdrawal treaty, because it is the very antithesis of taking back control, but the truth we have to face is that the result of this referendum was not some “exotic spreesm,” as expressed by the right hon. Member for Twickenham (Sir Vince Cable), or any other kind of freak accident. It was the logical expression of the accumulation of decades of resentment about how this country has become subject to an out-of-touch political elite who have become happy to subjugate national democratic accountability to an unelected, unaccountable group of commissioners and judges in the EU. That is what the referendum was about.

Now I hear some Members, like my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), openly arguing for remaining in the EU, as though the referendum could somehow be ignored. That way madness lies for our country. It would be a final vindication of those who would argue that votes never count and democracy can change nothing.
Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): If my hon. Friend listened to what I am arguing, he would realise that I have said repeatedly that I think we are embarked on an exercise in self-mutilation, but that I recognise that, if that is what people want now that the self-mutilation is so apparent, then that is what they will indeed have. What I am not prepared to do, as a Member of this House, is to carry it out myself without going back and asking them if that is what they really want.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Let us now dispose of the dangerous idea that there can be some disingenuous second people’s vote to try to force remain back on to the agenda. Who with any authority suggested in 2016 that the question would be only a dry run?

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Boris.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: No, he did not.

The House of Commons voted by 544 votes to 53 to give a clear choice of remain or leave to the voters. The 2016 referendum was the people’s choice. Before there is a fresh motion, I gently remind the House, as one who campaigned for and voted leave and on behalf of the majority who voted in the referendum, that we voted leave and we want leave. Despite all the false warnings that a leave vote would wreak havoc on the economy, a majority of us voted to leave. We represent at least 400 of the constituencies represented in this House. We also represent a broad cross-section of society.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is part of the problem not that a lot of the people in charge of these negotiations do not accept the result of the referendum? Michel Barnier has been heard recently to say that negotiating with the British is like negotiating a referendum? Michel Barnier has been heard recently to refer to the problem not that a lot of the people in charge of a single customs territory or subject to an EU rulebook.

The prospect of bringing an acceptable withdrawal treaty to this House is also about making it clear that the UK is preparing and will be prepared to leave the EU on 29 March without a withdrawal agreement, to trade on World Trade Organisation terms. The only alternative is to lie down and submit to the will of the EU, which seems to be the policy of an increasing number of people in this House.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): rose—

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am not giving way. Everyone can see that most countries are outside the EU and, do you know what, they are absolutely fine. Our overriding duty should be to work together to implement the decision and to forge a new consensus about the future of this great nation which reflects the way in which the vast majority of the constituencies in this House voted. The UK is a resilient nation, which has faced far greater challenges to our survival, prosperity and independence than the short-term practical and administrative challenges of leaving the EU. This is not an economic crisis like the 1970s oil shock or the 2008 banking crisis. This will not cause rampant inflation or leave people wondering whether the ATM will deliver their cash. This is not a decision to go to war. It is not a terrorist attack. What this House needs to show is more faith in the people and the way they voted, and more faith in the future of this country. If we sell ourselves short in this House, we are selling the British people short.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): I am not giving away the farm. Everyone can see that most countries are outside the EU and, do you know what, they are absolutely fine. Our overriding duty should be to work together to implement the decision and to forge a new consensus about the future of this great nation which reflects the way in which the vast majority of the constituencies in this House voted.

For the House to accept a deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled blindfold Brexit. Let us be clear that the Prime Minister’s deal means that most crucial issues would be settled
in a lucky dip—to give the go-ahead to Brexit without knowing what it means for key issues such as the final customs and single market arrangements, cross-border law enforcement mechanisms, participation in European research programmes, access to funding from the European Investment Bank, regulations for cross-border transport, data sharing, student exchanges, defence and security co-operation, and much else. The deal is a sham, and this whole procedure has been a farce. The Prime Minister is trying to sell her deal as better than no deal. She is delaying this vote in the hope that Parliament will run out of time and be forced into backing it. But Parliament now needs to make it clear that the choice is not just between no deal and the Prime Minister’s woeful deal, which she has herself now acknowledged as such, having gone to European capitals not only with her handbag but cap in hand.

Like all hon. Members, I have received a lot of correspondence asking me to support this deal and other correspondence asking me to support other things. But the vast majority are asking me to vote against this deal and support a people’s vote, with the latest polls putting Wales at more than 50% in favour of remain. The two leave options on the table are dangerous, and people need to be given a choice, now that they see what options are available, between no deal, the Prime Minister’s deal, or remaining. The only viable way ahead is a people’s vote. I want to stay in the EU, but it must be for the country to decide.

3.34 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The Prime Minister has now reached the cliff-edge of resignation. I believe that she may well have to resign. Yesterday’s events—running away from the vote and then off to Germany, Holland and the EU—was yet another humiliation for the United Kingdom. She is clanging to the wreckage. She has reached the point of no return. The pulling of the vote yesterday was an insult to the House of Commons and an admission of the failure of the withdrawal agreement itself. It has magnified the contempt of the House displayed in respect of the Attorney General’s opinion, and that issue itself remains incomplete, because we have not had answers that we have asked for. We have not had answers from the Prime Minister to the questions I have asked her in Committee and on the Floor of the House. The agreement has all the characteristics of a dead parrot.

The Prime Minister’s reply to me yesterday about breaches of the ministerial code simply did not begin to answer my complaint about whether the Law Officers’ opinion was fully and properly sought in good time in relation to the fundamental issues that lie at the heart of the withdrawal agreement, our relationship with the European Union and the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. These issues go beyond the backstop. The withdrawal agreement fails on every fundamental test. The vote is needed now. There is also the question of the incompatibility of the Act with the mere treaty itself, which is the withdrawal agreement, and of the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom itself.

Public trust in our democracy has been shattered. On Sunday, a poll of 10,000 people showed that 63% of all those who took part had no faith or trust in the Government’s withdrawal agreement. There have been broken promises and misleading statements, breaches of Cabinet collective responsibility, and failures to comply with the ministerial code and the Cabinet manual, not to mention the Commons resolution on the publication of the Attorney General’s full and final legal advice.

There are a vast range of unresolved matters for which it was necessary to have the meaningful vote today, including the question of the transitional arrangements; the indefinite nature of any such extension; the financial framework after 31 December 2020, including the manner in which our own resources would be dealt with and the loss of the rebate itself; the question whether or not we can implement trade deals after the end of the transitional period; and the extent to which we cannot control our laws. All are as important, in their own way, as the backstop. The sovereignty of this House and our control over our laws is fundamental. It is what this Parliament is all about. It is how it has evolved to its greatness. This is the issue. Further discussion of the backstop in the secret rooms of Holland, Germany and Brussels will not resolve these questions.

As I conclude, I call to mind John of Gaunt’s famous speech in which he declared that with “rotten parchment bonds” this country: “Hath made a shameful conquest of itself.”

This withdrawal agreement does just that: it is a breach of trust and a betrayal. This clutching of straws and running away from the vote is contemptible.

3.38 pm

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Yesterday’s shameful episode has left many in this House and outside in bewilderment, scratching their heads and virtually at a loss for words as a result of the pulling of the vote. None the less, from the rubble of yesterday there is still the possibility, slim as it may be, that something can emerge. If I work out from today to the date that is currently being touted, 21 January, it seems to me that there are 40 days and 40 nights to lose oneself in the wilderness. I do not know what will emerge at the end of that, but I do know that the prophet Moses delivered something—I would not wish to liken the Prime Minister to the prophet Moses, but we will wait and see.

Chris Bryant: The problem with the 40 days is the temptations that come to individual Members when they are given assurances and then do not see solid real change to the withdrawal agreement that is legally binding.

Mr Campbell: Yes, indeed. That is a very good point. I want briefly to go through what we have been left with at the moment. It would appear that there are still those who want to try to align the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, with the euro state—that cabal that still rules in Brussels. Who knows what will happen? I know that, some time ago, there was mention of the European parliamentary elections. We do not know what will happen, but we know that they will take place two months after we are scheduled to leave. We know that, over the past 18 months, the direction of travel in many of the countries involved has been a lurch to the far right, and we wait to see what next June will bring. I am not sure whether people will want us to be aligned with those countries—to Poland, to Hungary,
to Wilders in the Netherlands, to France, to Germany and to Italy—when we see what comes from those elections.

In the closing moments of my speech, I want to address the issue of the backstop. Much has been made of it. One year ago our Prime Minister made a fundamental mistake, which was to accept that a deal could be done only with a backstop that had to be incorporated as part of the deal. Unfortunately, the EU and the Irish Government have sold our Government the line that the backstop is necessary to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic. I have stated this on numerous occasions in this House: there are 643 Members who take their seats in this House, 642 of whom live further away from the border than me. This is about not what I think about the border, but what I and others know about the border and its historical significance.

Antoinette Sandbach: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that current opinion polling in Northern Ireland indicates that the backstop may well be irrelevant in due course, because people are moving towards the idea of a united Ireland in the face of Brexit?

Mr Campbell: The hon. Lady should not pay too much attention to opinion polls. The one she should pay attention to is the one that took place two years ago. I would be happy to face any vote in Northern Ireland about where our future lies.

It does not matter whether a backstop comes under WTO rules, under the guidance of the EU or under the insistence of the United Kingdom Government, because no infrastructure established at the border can work. A backstop is totally and utterly unnecessary, because it cannot work. There are 290 crossing points on under 300 miles of land border in Northern Ireland, so no structure of any kind, anywhere, can work. That is why we do not need a backstop. People would treat the infrastructure with disdain and contempt, because they could avoid it so easily. If we had six, 16 or 26 manned roads across the border—forgetting about the possibility of threats to the people who would man those roads—all of those who lived there, worked there and traded there would know 100 ways to get round the infrastructure without having to go through any customs checkpoints, so there is no point to any backstop. We have been led into a trap. A backstop created by the EU that is null and void and that cannot exist will not prevent any border from coming about.

The only border that exists is a land border between the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic, which will endure long after we have left the EU, long after WTO rules come in—if they ever come in—and long after the United Kingdom has eventually worked out the way for our country to be an extraneous independent nation state that trades and has good, friendly relationships with those inside and outside the EU. That is our future. We need a better deal, and the Prime Minister needs to bring that back from Brussels if she can do a magic trick that I believe is beyond her.

3.45 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell), but I shall try to confine my remarks to the issue on the Order Paper, rather than the more general debate on the merit of the Government’s deal.

I supported this debate because I happen to agree that what happened yesterday was essentially pretty unprecedented. We have a deal before this House, and this House was in the middle of considering it. The terms under which the EU withdrawal Act passed through the House were an absolute and clear undertaking by the Government that Parliament would be involved at every stage, and that as soon as the deal had been reached it would be brought expeditiously to us—indeed, so much so that some people wondered if it might not appear in the House almost too early, before we had the opportunity to consider it properly. We were in the middle of that consideration.

I fully appreciate my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s difficulty. If by going away and speaking to our European partners she will be a position to achieve some change to the deal that she can properly bring before the House, I can understand why she may have wished to interrupt its consideration. But I really do worry about the implications, because although I listened carefully to my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Government appear to have given themselves very considerable latitude as to when this business might return to us. If it is clear by Monday of next week that the Prime Minister has not changed the terms of the treaty, I would expect that this House’s consideration of the business ought to resume at once, because it is not in the national interest that we should be prevented from expressing our view on the deal as soon as possible. That is my principal concern.

I was reassured by some of the things I heard this afternoon about the Government’s intentions, but it would simply not be acceptable for the debate to resume on 19 January. I just wanted to make that point, because it seems to be key.

Chris Bryant: I wonder whether the right hon. and learned Gentleman has heard the view expressed by some Government Whips that if the Prime Minister has not really got anything out of this week, there would be no point in Parliament sitting next week at all, and that the Government would therefore announce on Thursday that we were not going to sit next week. He will of course be aware that we would have to have a vote on that.

Mr Grieve: I am quite clear that the urgency of the situation that we face, and the divisions both in the country and within this House make it imperative that this House should be able to pronounce on the deal that the Government bring forward.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): My right hon. and learned Friend makes eloquent points, as ever, but is not the fundamental issue here that we have a Brexit nation and a remain Parliament? However eloquent his points are, there is an emotional desire on the part of him and other Members not to respect the mandate of the British people, and that mandate is a critical one if we live in a democracy.

Mr Grieve: For two and a half years now, we have watched the process of trying to implement the result of the 2016 referendum, and if there is one thing on which I hope we might be able to agree, it is that it is perfectly plain that it is proving extraordinarily difficult to do.
My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, mindful of the risks of economic damage and damage to our national security and wellbeing, has laboured long and hard to try to get a deal. Yet the reality, which has become quite clear in the last week, is that when that deal is examined, it contains numerous flaws and places us in a new and complex legal relationship with the EU, which in many ways, on any objective analysis, appears to be rather less desirable than remaining in it.

I appreciate that there are hon. Members, including some of my hon. Friends, who believe that there is some clean and easy way through this process. I simply make the point that each of us as Members of this House has a responsibility to our constituents, but also to ourselves, to make judgments on what is for the best for our country. That is what I will continue to try to do, while respecting, or doing my best to give effect to and think through the consequence of, the referendum.

But I say to my hon. Friends that at the end of the day, it becomes clearer and clearer to me that it is unlikely that there is going to be agreement in this House on the model that we want, because of the inherent difficulties that flow from Brexit itself. In those circumstances, I can only repeat what I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) about why I support a referendum. It is not because that presupposes a single outcome—after all, it might go against my own arguments—but because at least it provides a way of resolving this that I happen to think would be rather less divisive than the interminable debate that is going to beset us here, even if we leave on 29 March, for the next two and half to five years.

Mr Seely rose—

Mr Grieve: No, I will not give way again.

That is the true problem that we face. The alternative, I suppose, is that this Government may collapse and we may have a general election, but I have to say to my hon. Friends—indeed, even to Opposition Members—that I am not sure that in itself will solve the conundrum that we face.

As I say, what I would ask of the Government at the moment—I do not wish to labour these points—is that we are given the necessary space to debate this rationally, because one thing that has worried me in the past 12 months has been repeated attempts to close down opportunities for debate in this House by short-circuiting the process, and that has done us no good at all. Some of us have had to fight really hard to make sure that the process has been followed properly, and have been reviled at times for doing so—yet the evidence shows, I am afraid, that we were right. For that reason, I will try to continue in the same fashion. If we have the right process, we will come up with the right answers.

3.51 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Unlike most of my colleagues on the Opposition Benches and, indeed, some on the other side, I did not view our vote to leave the European Union as a national shame. I did not view it as an embarrassment. I did not apologise for it, I did not hide from it, and I did not ultimately try to reverse it. I was very proud that it was the greatest exercise in democracy of my lifetime. I was so proud that 70% of constituents MP with a Labour MP voted leave, and that even in London the leave vote was greater than the vote given to Sadiq Khan when elected as Mayor.

I felt humbled by all those who had never voted before but came out because this time they knew their vote really would count. People had been told that if they voted leave they were stupid, they did not understand, they were racist—

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I agree with my hon. Friend that people being called stupid was completely wrong. Does she agree that people in North Tyneside, although I did not agree with the way they voted, were right when they made a decision against unscrupulous work practices and foreign agencies bringing in European workers denied a proper rate of pay and denying local people jobs?

Kate Hoey: My hon. Friend is quite right. It was quite shocking just how those people were ridiculed by so many people on the remain side. They voted to leave and they showed their confidence in the future of our country.

Two days after the referendum, my 95-year-old mother, who was desperately keen to get us out of the EU, said to me, “Catharine”—because that is what I am called by the family—“you know, dear, they will never let us leave.” I said, “No, Mum—we live in a democracy.” How wrong I was. If only, on 24 June 2016, we had all come together determined to make the most of our new opportunities, we may not have found ourselves in this position. Too many people continued to find every legal impediment to delay and try to thwart the decision of the British people.

I am very sorry that, as it turns out, it almost seems as though the Prime Minister has acted like she is one of those people. I believed her when she said that Brexit meant Brexit, but I was wrong. I believed her when she set out her red lines in her Lancaster House speech, but I was wrong. I believed her when she said that no deal was better than a bad deal, but I was wrong. Most of all, as a strong supporter of our United Kingdom and Northern Ireland’s place within it, I believed her when she said that there would never be a border down the Irish sea, but I was wrong.

When it comes to caving into the EU, it seems that our Prime Minister went wanting to be nice and did not stand up for our country. When histories are written of this period, as they will be, they will revolve around the question of whether the border in Northern Ireland was a true stumbling block or just a convenient excuse. The hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) gave very clear evidence of why everything that has been said about the border was wrong.

Dr Julian Lewis: Is the hon. Lady aware that when the Prime Minister came before the Liaison Committee a few days ago, I asked her nine times in seven minutes who would actually erect a border—whether the Irish would, whether the British would or whether the EU would send in its army to do it? She refused and declined to answer that question every time, because the answer is that no one would ever put it there.
Kate Hoey: The right hon. Gentleman is right. The EU has said clearly that even in a no-deal situation and under WTO rules, there would not need to be a hard border, and therefore there is no need for a backstop. Anything that the Prime Minister comes back with—more reassurance, more letters and more white bits of paper—will not be accepted unless it is in a legally binding agreement. The political choice was taken by the Government to treat the border as an insoluble problem.

A majority in my constituency voted to remain—not everybody, but I acknowledge that. I always say that the third of my constituents who voted to leave in London were in a minority, but they have a right to be represented. It was a national referendum with a national decision to be implemented. I can now say with certainty that virtually none of my constituents in Vauxhall, whether leavers or remainers, has asked me to support this deal.

Whatever is said about the political declaration and all its fine words about intentions for the future, it is not a legal document, and it is therefore meaningless. How could we, as a United Kingdom, have got into a situation where our Prime Minister wants to sign a legally binding agreement giving away £39 billion in advance of any trade negotiations? It will be seen by most members of the public as mind-blowingly stupid.

We hear so much about how clever our civil servants are and how wonderful their advice must be. Frankly, I think they are very clever. They have helped to do what the EU wished and supported a deal that is more in line with the view of the elite—that we never should have left. They have worked so hard to keep us as closely aligned to the EU as possible and then sell it as the best deal we can get. As a remainder herself, the Prime Minister has never really understood why people voted to leave. I am afraid that the EU has seemed to run rings around her.

It is hardly surprising that, after 40 years, we are now so intertwined with the EU that it is difficult to untangle. Those calling for a second referendum when the first has not been implemented should remember that during all those years—I have been here for nearly 30 of them—Parliament signed up to one treaty after another, without ever asking the people of our great country to sign away their sovereignty. Millions of Labour voters will feel utterly betrayed if the EU wished and supported a deal that is more in line with the view of the elite—that we never should have left. They have worked so hard to keep us as closely aligned to the EU as possible and then sell it as the best deal we can get. As a remainder herself, the Prime Minister has never really understood why people voted to leave. I am afraid that the EU has seemed to run rings around her.

I cannot vote for this deal. There are lots of things in it, as well as the backstop, that I cannot support. I expect the Prime Minister or another leader of the Government, if we cannot get a general election, to go and ask for something much better. If we cannot get that, I do not fear World Trade Organisation rules. There is hysterical fear-mongering going on about how we cannot leave on WTO terms. I would support that, and I think that that is what we will end up doing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. On account of the level of demand and because I am keen to accommodate as many remaining would-be contributors as possible, I am sorry to announce that the time limit must be reduced with immediate effect to three minutes. I call Nadine Dorries.

3.59 pm

Ms Nadine Dorries (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I cannot boil an egg in that time.

I was struck on my train journey this morning at how everybody in my carriage was talking about Brexit. It was the first time that had happened. One woman announced that she had watched the BBC Parliament channel for the first time ever yesterday and expressed her amazement that she had not even known it existed. I was absolutely struck by how well informed my fellow passengers were, and the main thread of their conversation was to keep asking questions why. I lifted my copy of The Times newspaper up over my face—I could feel myself burning with embarrassment—just in case I was recognised. The questions were: why did the Prime Minister think she could get a better deal on a flying visit than the one she had been able to get over the past two years; if a better deal was available, why had it not been reached already; and why had the Prime Minister insisted all along that this was a great deal until yesterday? They were confused. The most pointed question of all was: why did the Prime Minister stop the vote yesterday, and what was that all about? If the outcome of the vote had absolutely known why it was stopped? Of course, we know the answers to those questions, but it struck me how the general public would not understand why that happened.

I am also struck by the fact that the Prime Minister has gone to the EU—this is a mild humiliation for her and I think she has been badly advised to do so, but I will say more about that in a moment—to get reassurance about the backstop. She is not going to be given reassurance about the backstop. At the moment, she is going to be given a letter of intent about the interpretation of the withdrawal agreement. That is going to make no difference to anybody in this place whose main concern is the backstop. In fact, Juncker has said this morning that he is going to give no concessions whatsoever. The withdrawal agreement will not be looked at and will not be reopened. Even the Moldovans have an exit clause in their trade agreement. We need to get the Moldovan negotiators over here, because they seem to have done a much better job.

In my last few seconds, I want to say that I think the Prime Minister is being very badly advised by third-rate advisers in No. 10. I saw our Whips Office criticised in the papers today, but it is nothing to do with the Whips, who are also having to deal with the same third-rate advisers. The Prime Minister is deploying all sorts of tactics, such as sending Ministers out and spending lots of money—and I would not be surprised if Parliament does rise this week—but it appears to me that the Prime Minister is in a bunker: she is starring in her own episode of “Downfall”, and we all know how that story ends.

4.2 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I have had my opportunity to speak in the five-day debate, but many Members have not, and the position they have been put in is unclear and, indeed, entirely unacceptable. Democracy delayed is democracy denied. The Prime Minister is playing a potentially catastrophic hand by delaying the vote on her deal, as has been outlined repeatedly during this debate. It is abundantly clear that her tactic is, yet again, to delay and delay until, at the very last chance, we are railroaded into accepting her deal—reducing the meaningful vote into this meaningless mess.

Today, the Prime Minister is hawking her views around the 27 again, which is futile. The deal itself is not negotiable, as we have heard. The Prime Minister may
get the appearance of a clarification on the political statement, but despite all its fine words, the political statement is just a statement of intent. She will satisfy no one.

I believe a motion of no confidence should be brought forward at the earliest possible opportunity to provide enough time to pursue another course. For us in Plaid Cymru, the Prime Minister's actions make the case for a people's vote all the stronger. That vote must be a choice between the deal that is on the table and to remain. There is no majority in this place for anything else, such as the fantasy of our leaving with no deal at all. Significantly, the Prime Minister's deal has been decisively rejected by both the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. It must be put to the people.

The no-deal option is not acceptable to this House, and from his words earlier, neither is it acceptable to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. We would not be at liberty to do as we please in the world, as some suppose, and it would be disastrous for the people of the United Kingdom, particularly poorer people and those in areas seen as peripheral. As an example, I am thinking in particular of farming in Wales. Tariffs against our farming interests would devastate the industry both in Wales and through much of upland Britain.

Finally, we must not be satisfied just to remain. Wales and other parts of the UK have suffered enough from poverty, and from the austerity that has provided advantages for the few and fundamental economic injustice. This crisis must be a turning point. A vote to remain has to be a vote to reform, to renew and to regenerate; it cannot be a vote simply for the Europe that is, but for the Europe to reform, to renew and to regenerate; it cannot be a vote to remain has to be.

4.4 pm  
\[Hywel Williams\]

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I left work last night embarrassed to call myself a Member of Parliament. The Government are not without blame—the deal is far from perfect and our Brexit journey could have been managed better—but yesterday evening, footage was being shown all around the world of the Mace being taken, apparently because MPs, although legions of them have been on TV to say that they could not vote for the deal and the Prime Minister needed to do better, were outraged that she wanted to go off and do exactly as we had instructed.

It turns out that, for too many of us in this place, the politics matters more than the reality. Very few of those who intended to vote against the deal really wanted the Prime Minister to go off and do any better; they wanted no deal, or no Brexit, or a second referendum, or a general election, or a new Prime Minister. The divisiveness of no deal or no Brexit seems to matter not one bit. The mockery that a second referendum would make of our democracy seems to matter not one bit. The reality that a change of Prime Minister would still mean that someone had to captain the same ship through the same storm seems to matter not one bit, and the fact that the Labour party says it wants a general election, but still has no idea what its Brexit policy is, let alone how it would negotiate it, seems to matter not one bit either.

So here we are, angry that we did not get a vote on whether we should have a vote, having a debate about not having a debate. There is no majority for anything and, as far as I can tell, there is little desire to find a majority either. At the most important parliamentary moment in decades, we are digging our trenches deeper and refusing to find compromise. In the past few weeks, the Prime Minister has travelled around the country, trying to sell her plan. She has spent hours in this place doing the same. Now she is travelling around Europe, trying to articulate Parliament's requirement that we get something different.

Despondent, last night I read an early draft of my maiden speech, written just three and a half years ago. It was filled with hope: hope for what our Government could do, and hope for what this Parliament can do. We have all agreed that this is not how it should be. Deep down, we all know that we can do better, but only if we climb out of our trenches and reconsider all options, especially the Prime Minister's deal. The Christmas present that the nation seems to want above any other is for us in this place to rediscover the art of the pragmatic compromise. That is not weakness; it is leadership.

4.7 pm  
\[Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab)\]

The Minister today, and the Prime Minister yesterday, talked about the importance of honesty in the debate. I agree, but my contention is that a lack of honesty and candour about the reality of what the Government are trying to do has been largely responsible for their ending up in this position.

Let us take the issue of the backstop. The backstop is only there if a treaty is not agreed that does the same job as the backstop, which is to ensure such a degree of customs and regulatory alignment that there is no need for a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Have the Government really been honest about what that means for any treaty that is agreed instead of the backstop? Have they been candid about that? I do not think so. Do we really think that the Government have been candid and honest with themselves, their own Back Benchers or the country about the implications of what they agreed to this time last year, when they agreed that the backstop or something like it would be there? I do not think so.

What the Government agreed was such a degree of alignment, which is now beginning to be reflected in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, that instead of taking back control as the referendum was supposed to do, people can now see that this is an enormous transfer of sovereignty from the UK to the European Union. It sets a future for us as huge European rule takers. I agree with the Minister about honesty and candour, but I do not think it has been there.

The second point is about process and trust. I do not want to repeat the exchanges during the urgent question earlier, but there is now a real suspicion that what the Government will try to do is not bring forward an early resumption of the debate, but instead run down the clock, so that this decision is not made on the basis of the merits of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, but rather set against the disaster of no deal. To do that is simply to hold a gun to Parliament's head. Are the Government really going to say, "If you don't vote for what we propose, we are due to start stockpiling food"? That is hugely irresponsible with the public, industry and businesses.
any agreement requires compromise. That is what the Members need to grow up collectively and realise that and the ones who fancy their chances as Prime Minister.

the Labour Front Bench who want a general election, the ones who want a second referendum, the ones on the no dealers, the ones who want to reverse article 50, hard look at themselves in the mirror: the Brexiteers, that may be to Members.

exactly what we need to resolve some of the issues that wholly unacceptable. If Members really want to get to House are now asserting that a pause in proceedings is withdra wal agreement, voices from both sides of the

called for more consideration of the content of the alternatives . I agree with him: we should be responsible

Ministers is to ensure that Parliament can vote on those alternatives . The challenge I put to him and to his fellow

focusing on the sensibilities of the House of Commons, rather than the House to have the best deal to put to a vote. Rather than

leaving the EU , and the Government owe it to the

that the withdrawal agreement, as drafted, not only would not pass, but would not pass by a very large majority. Given the gravity of the matter before us and the desire to get on with this quickly, it seemed to me the right thing to do to pause the process while the Prime Minister attempts to remedy the defects that hon. and right hon. Members had identified. In doing so, she had listened to the concerns that were being raised, and I hope that she will be able to address them.

There will, of course, be a vote. No one is attempting to duck a vote—a vote will come and Parliament’s voice will be heard—but I agree with the points made by the
right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) a few moments ago regarding the timing, because 29 March will be upon us pretty quickly, and it would not be responsible of the Government to take an unduly long time to come back to the House. If they do—and in my view, 21 January would be an unduly long time—we as a Parliament, and indeed, as a country, will not have the time to prepare ourselves for whatever the future may hold. So I say to Government Front Benchers: please bring this matter back before the House extremely quickly, so that we have the time to deal with this with as much notice as we can possibly manage.

I also say to Government Front Benchers that, in order to address the concerns that colleagues have been raising, particularly in relation to the backstop, whatever assurances the Prime Minister is able to obtain will have to be legally binding. I very much hope, as she speaks to other European leaders today, tomorrow and at the European Council on Thursday, that such assurances can be found in a legally binding form.

The right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) mentioned some of the ways forward, such as the Norway option. Let me put it on record that I think the Norway option is a terrible option, in that it entails all the obligations of European Union membership—unlimited free movement, full budget contributions and being rule takers across the entire economy—without any say at all. There is no question whatsoever that I would ever contemplate voting for such an option.

**4.18 pm**

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): We live in unprecedented times. There have been 20 ministerial resignations and many, many more at Parliamentary Private Secretary level, and the Government have been found to be in contempt of Parliament—the first Government ever to be. No one even seems to bat an eyelid any more. Then, we had the events of yesterday. Yes, the Prime Minister may have spent 22 hours on her feet answering questions on all this, but we are still none the wiser. We have no concrete date for when that meaningful vote will ever come to fruition. Every time legitimate scrutiny is performed by Opposition Members, we are shut down and told that it is political point scoring.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con) rose—

**Dr Huq:** I will not give way because a lot of people want to speak.

The Government are crippled by indecision and paralysed by Brexit. Labour was accused of constructive ambiguity when trying to steer a course for both the 48% and the 52%, but now the Government have adopted the same strategy, trying to scare people into supporting their deal by invoking either no deal or no Brexit, depending on who they are talking to—they cannot both be right. Or are they trying to bore us into accepting their deal by saying that the British public are bored of this, even while refusing to make a fresh assessment of what the British public think now?

Of the 164 hon. Members who spoke in the debate, 122 were against the deal. This is a decision bigger than any piece of legislation, any Budget, anything that any of us has voted for, but it seems that the Government do not want to play ball and follow the parliamentary rules. Every time I have raised the question of a people’s vote with the Prime Minister, she has told me that it would corrode trust in politics and politicians, but can she not see that she is doing just that—corroding faith in democracy? She has whipped MPs to abstain on Opposition day motions—I think it all started with Andy Burnham’s motion on how people are not law abiding and should not be used as such in the negotiations. The Government have been forced to publish legal and economic advice. We now know why, having seen that advice. They have been found in contempt of Parliament. And all that before yesterday marching us all to the top of the hill and then pulling the vote at the last minute.

Democracy is not just about turnouts at general elections; it is about votes in this House, and we surely cannot have a Government who decide not to take part when they see that they cannot win. Our unwritten constitution may not have formal checks and balances, but it relies on trust, and that is slipping away from the Government. They are clocking up air miles rather than votes, and ditching openness and transparency. Any decision should be taken only when people are in full command of the facts, but this Government believe the opposite. The only way to resolve this is by holding a people’s vote to see if the will of the people in 2016 is still the will of the people now.

**4.21 pm**

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): As you will recall, Mr Speaker, there have been many debates and statements in this House—there is no debate about that—but Parliament has never been fully involved in trying to build a compromise and find a way of delivering on Brexit. That involvement should have come at the beginning of the process, but ironically is taking place now. Unfortunately, my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) are no longer in their places, but for them to speak about compromise at this late stage—perhaps they do not know or have failed to understand all that has taken place in the last two and a half years—was at best unfortunate.

It gives me no pleasure to say this, but the fault lies fairly and squarely in the leadership—or lack of—at the highest levels of Government, in the Cabinet and in my party. In numerous conversations and meetings, Members of this place who supported remain went to the Prime Minister and spoke at length about how she could deliver the result of the referendum while keeping this place together, building a consensus and doing the right thing by seeing off those who were never going to be bought off or satisfied and who only wanted their hard Brexit.

Some of us begged the Prime Minister to her face to reach over the top of the Labour Front Bench, who have been pitiful in their supposed role as Her Majesty’s Opposition, and form that consensus, which undoubtedly existed not just among Labour’s Back Benchers but down there with the SNP, whose Members have always said they would vote for and support staying in the single market and customs union. We tried to establish that very early on, but instead, like the 48%, we were cast aside and the Prime Minister made the terrible mistake of always trying to appease the members of the ERG, who now act as a party within a party.
I will not repeat the wise words of my friend the right hon. Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr. McFadden), but to make matters worse, instead of candour and honesty, we got stupid, irresponsible slogans such as “Brexit means Brexit”, when nobody knew what on earth it meant. Worst of all, we were told that no deal was better than a bad deal, and now we are surprised that we are trying to persuade people that no deal would be the very worst outcome. It was only in the last moments, having exhausted all other alternatives, that we landed on a people’s vote. It is now the only way out of this mess.

4.24 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): Well, Mr Speaker, what a day!

Since 1992, when I first entered politics on the old Clydebank District Council, I never thought for a moment not only that I would sit here representing one of the greatest constituencies in these islands, but that I would listen to Members on the Government Benches—with the exception of the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), I must admit—threaten the Democratic Unionist party with a united Ireland. That is a way to win friends and influence people. Then there was the position yesterday on the Floor of the House of Commons when the vote was pulled. Parliamentary democracy might as well have ended with a coup d’état by the Government of the United Kingdom. It is an extraordinary position when the Executive fundamentally undermine the authority of the legislator. Anyone here who has not read a single book on political theory might as well go and read one now, because that is where we are in terms of the democratic deficit in this political state.

It may come as no surprise that Scottish National party Members have been consistent in our support for the single market and the customs union, rather than making back-door deals like others. I think that even the official Opposition have approached members of the DUP, who do seem to be winning friends and influencing people. Good luck to them. They at least received the offer of a backstop; we did not, although the official Opposition have approached members of the DUP, who do seem to be winning friends and influencing people. Good luck to them. They at least received the offer of a backstop; we did not, although

I say to the Leader of the Opposition, “Do us all a favour and table a motion of no confidence”, because I have every confidence that my constituency will not only vote for the Scottish National party but vote to remain in the European Union—and the time may come for my nation to take its place once again as an independent sovereign country.

4.27 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes). I am not sure that I can quite follow his passion, but I will do my best.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me five minutes outside the Chamber. I was very embarrassed to have to go very late to an Anglo-French meeting. A number of French people, including mayors from the north of France, were attending the event along with others from the south of England, and we were working together to try and re-energise our respective coasts. I tried to explain to those people why I was late; that we were having a debate about why we had not had a debate yesterday; and we were going to have a vote on why we had not had a vote last night. Luckily, a French translator was on hand, but I said, “Don’t worry about that”, because none of the French audience would really understand it either.

I was particularly keen to speak this afternoon. I have been blessed in a way, because I have heard from other Conservative Members who have very different views on how we should be leaving the European Union, or whether we should be leaving at all. I respect those views, but I am also reminded that we need to find a way through this. My great concern is that, as Parliament takes control, it is quite clear that Parliament cannot find its own consensual voice when it comes to what that control should be. It is all well and good for my hon. Friend the Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) to say that leave means leave—that was effectively in our manifesto, and that is where we should be going—and it is all well and good for my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr. Grieve) to say that we should look towards a second referendum. It is also all well and good for my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)—my great friend—to say that we should remain in the single market and the customs union. But I am also reminded that 83% of voters in the election voted for the Labour party or Conservative party manifestos that said that we would not be doing those things. So there is a mandate to leave on the terms I would advocate.

“Compromise” is not a sexy word, but we all need to embrace it as we proceed through this very difficult situation, because 52% of the country voted to leave, and of course they wanted to go, but 48% did not. What this agreement gives to those 48% is a relationship with the EU that will last: it will go deeper in some terms, but in other terms will recognise the referendum result. That is what I told the French delegation today. I said, “We want to continue to work with you, and work deeper.” But for those 52% who wanted us to exit, the democratic right was exercised and that means leaving, but it does not mean leaving with no deal at all.

So I ask right hon. and hon. Members, if they are concerned about business uncertainty, about jobs, about security and about their constituents’ livelihoods, please embrace compromise and find a way through.

4.30 pm

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I have had the honour and pleasure of serving Battersea for little more than 18 months, but it is clear to me, as it is to Members
across the House, that the behaviour of this Government is unprecedented—unprecedented in their chaotic approach to managing Brexit, unprecedented in their contempt and disregard for Members of this House and the people we represent, unprecedented in their Ministers saying one thing and then going on to do another. At each stage of their handling of Brexit, the Government have attempted to avoid scrutiny and duck responsibility. They have tried to deny us a meaningful vote on the deal, they have tried to withhold legal advice, and they have tried to keep the economic impact assessments out of the public domain, and now the Prime Minister has pulled the meaningful vote just days after promising she would not do that, and just hours after her Government Ministers said she would not do it. It is a shameful record for any Government, but especially for this dysfunctional Government confronted with the magnitude of the political issue of Brexit.

I am angry not just because the Government are undermining parliamentary procedure, but because I know that my constituents are both angry and alarmed at what they see happening. I have received thousands of pieces of correspondence from constituents calling on me to reject the Prime Minister’s deal, and I have written back to each and every one of them saying I will vote against it; what do I tell them now? We are told that the vote will come before 21 January 2019, but that will only heighten fears of a no-deal scenario. My constituents need reassurance, but with this Government and this Prime Minister that is not something I can give. My constituents need a Government who will not only sort out this Brexit mess but solve the other crises facing our country: the housing crisis, the crisis in social security, the crisis in our NHS.

Dr Allin-Khan: In pulling this vote, the Government continue to betray our children, our hospital patients and our much valued NHS workforce. The Prime Minister is running scared, unable to face a debate either in this House or on the television. Does my hon. Friend agree—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry to be unkind to the hon. Lady, but a large number of colleagues want to speak, so interventions should be brief.

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

Yesterday the Prime Minister again said that she wants to tackle social injustices, so may I recommend that she begins by reading and then accepting the conclusions of the UN report on extreme poverty? Eight years of her Government’s austerity policies have devastated our communities and devastated disabled people.

This Government have no answers to the challenges we face on Brexit or anything else. Their only achievement is to unite people in opposition to them. It is downright shameful that they have pulled the meaningful vote. Parliament must be given a meaningful vote on the deal. The Government must provide that guarantee. I know that many Members on the Conservative Benches share that view, so when the Prime Minister returns with no significant changes—as Jean-Claude Juncker said this morning, there is “no room whatsoever” for the Prime Minister to renegotiate her deal, and I understand that Angela Merkel has said almost the same thing—if this House finally gets the right to reject the deal, given the chance I urge Conservative Members to support a no-confidence motion.

4.34 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My constituency voted to leave the European Union, and I also voted to leave. I was elected as an MP almost exactly two years ago, shortly after the referendum, and I gave my maiden speech in the article 50 debate. I have consistently believed that, as the representative of my constituents, I must ensure that the Sleaford and North Hykeham voice on this matter is heard in this Chamber and that Brexit is delivered. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) that there is a significant challenge for the Government in delivering Brexit within a remain Parliament.

I have done a lot of listening to those local voices since the details of the deal first broke last month, and I have engaged with members of my association, with local residents, and with the hundreds of constituents who have got in touch with my office. Across all those conversations, there has been a common thread of concern. Whether they voted to remain or to leave in 2016, my constituents are concerned about the risk of entering into a backstop arrangement that could last indefinitely and that could not be left unilaterally. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General said, that is too great a risk to bear.

Many have asked the Prime Minister to listen to these concerns, which have been expressed privately and publicly, including in this Chamber. Members on both sides of the House have talked about the pressure of time and the need to ensure a good deal before 29 March 2019, and I agree with that. We have had three days of debate on this issue, and the will of the House is clear to everyone. I do not believe that having a vote would tell us anything we do not already know. Common sense recognises that the Government were faced with two options. They could continue to listen to the debate for two more days and then have a vote, the result of which was already known, or they could use that time to go back to the EU and change the offer to reflect the concerns. Clearly, improving the deal has to be the priority for all of us.

Opposition Members might prioritise a vote so that they can point and jeer and score political points, but the people of this country want us to get on with delivering the Brexit that they voted for. In my view, the right attitude is not to play politics but to consider what is best for this country and for our constituents, and to wish the Prime Minister and the Government good fortune in their negotiations with Brussels. I hope that she can come forward with a better deal from the EU, and I hope that other right hon. and hon. Members will wish her the best as well.

4.37 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I agree with the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), on one thing, which is that this is an abject mess. A rather unattractive feature of the Brexeters in this debate is...
that they tend to blame everyone but themselves for the mess. They are seeking to blame the civil servants, the professional advisers and indeed the remainers for the mess that they themselves have created. We saw the Prime Minister’s spin operation over the weekend, when she said that she would press her deal to a vote. She marched all her second lieutenants up the hill but then left them stranded under fire while she slipped back down the hill under the cover of darkness.

I am pleased that the deputy Prime Minister is in his place. He has talked about the Prime Minister’s Stakhanovite work ethic, but people who know their history will know that the production figures did not quite represent the large figures that were put forward under that regime. I am sorry to say that her productivity has been rather less than her air miles would suggest.

I must point out to the Leader of the Opposition that I am rather perplexed. As the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) said, we are having a debate about not having a debate, but many Opposition Members—certainly those in the Scottish National party—were rather expecting the Leader of the Opposition to initiate a no-confidence debate today. He has been in the House even longer than I have, and I am sure that he would agree, after the past week in which the Government have been defeated three times, found to be in contempt of Parliament for the first time in history and pulled the vote at very short notice yesterday, that he has never seen a Government quite so rudderless, ill-disciplined and leaderless as this one. I say to the Leader of the Opposition that it is time to stop hiding behind process, to discover his inner lion, to throw down the gauntlet and to table a motion of no confidence. Many Opposition Members would back him.

I hope that the deputy Prime Minister will guarantee that we will vote on the Prime Minister’s deal next week, and that a legislative means of ruling out no deal will be provided because of the damage that it would cause business, and to prevent us from descending further into the vortex of disarray and disillusionment.

4.40 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): William Butler Yeats wrote poetry about not being able to write poetry. Today, I am debating not having a debate yesterday, but I will take my three minutes where I find them.

The country is tired of politicians wasting time bickering. People want us to get on with delivering a practical Brexit that protects our interests and honours the vote. The House has made clear its deep concerns about the proposed withdrawal agreement, most of all the Northern Irish backstop. Having taken that on board, rightly but late in the day, the Prime Minister was correct to pause the parliamentary process and go back to Brussels. If opponents of the deal had been arguing in good faith, surely they should welcome that effort, wish her every success and reserve judgment until we see what changes can be negotiated in Brussels.

Opponents of the deal need to be honest with us and the voters about the options if the deal is rejected. As I see it, they would be no deal, Norway forever or a second referendum. Supporters of the first course of action should recognise that the House does not support no deal. I understand that some of the direst predictions could be averted through careful management and negotiated bilateral agreements with the EU, but none the less, I share the view that that represents an unacceptable risk to our economy and to British employers. I still believe in experts, although some seem not to.

The only realistic alternatives to the Prime Minister’s deal at this stage are a softer Brexit or no Brexit. As for the so-called Norway option, it is a bad fit for a country such as ours. For starters, what began as “Norway for now” has become “Norway forever” as the EEA nations have made it clear that we will not be welcome to use their arrangements as a stepping stone to the bespoke deal we need. In fact, because it will still need to include the backstop, the Norway plan is in many senses much worse than the withdrawal agreement, not least because it involves continuing payments into the EU budget and abandoning any attempt to control freedom of movement.

Finally, a word to those pushing for a second referendum: in the previous Parliament, the House voted overwhelmingly to pass the decision on our EU membership to the British people. The Government made explicit promises to honour the result.Conservative and Labour manifestos said the same. The push for a so-called people’s vote stands in a long and dishonourable traditional of electorates who disappoint Brussels being told to vote again. I strongly believe that a second vote would deliver the same result as the first at the price of further dividing our country and our society.

4.43 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): We are in a painfully predictable situation. We all knew, when article 50 was triggered, that there was a time limit. That is why I voted against it. We all knew that there would be French and German elections that would get in the way of negotiations, and then the Prime Minister called her own election, so there was less and less time. The then Brexit Secretary said that everything would be fine and that we would easily negotiate a deal that would give us exactly the same benefits as we have.

Here we are, two and a half years after the referendum and the deal is not yet cooked, so we are putting it back in the oven for a few more days, with a bit of salt and sugar, hoping it will come out and everyone will eat it. However, the reality is that some people want more salt and others want more sugar. The deal, whatever it is, will not be agreed in this place. The hard Brexiteers—the loony-tunes, let’s-Brexit-without-a-deal people—will never agree it. The hardcore remainers will not agree it, saying that we are better off with what we have.

I believe that Brexit is a betrayal of Conservatism because it gets rid of the best trading model in the world. It also gets rid of the United Kingdom Union because if we exit without a deal, there will necessarily be a hard border, otherwise there will be nothing to prevent migration. It will simply not work.

Brexit is a betrayal of socialism because, inherently, it will mean a smaller economy—a smaller cake to be divided more equally by a future Labour Government. It will mean that a subsequent Tory Government could reduce workers’ rights and environmental rights beneath EU standards, and socialists should oppose it.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Geraint Davies: No, I will not. Other people want to speak.
The Prime Minister is trying to kick this into the long grass, but the area of long grass is getting smaller and smaller because the lawn mower of article 50 means there are only a few weeks left. The reality is that any Brexit will mean we have less money. We will not have the £350 million a week. We will have to pay the divorce bill. We will have less trade. We will have fewer jobs. We will have less control because of Henry VIII powers and because we will have to obey EU rules. There will be just as much immigration but from different places.

The ECJ has decided that we can now revoke article 50. If we do not have a deal by 21 January and we face no deal, we should revoke article 50 and stay in the EU. If we have a deal, any sort of deal, we should put it to the people by deferring article 50 so that they can decide whether they want the deal on the table that the EU will accept, because we will not agree it here. If they do not want it, and if they find it better to stay in the EU, we should stay in the EU. I very much hope we stay in the EU, as we would be stronger, fairer and more united, and there would be a better future for all our children.

4.46 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): During the 2016 referendum many Members of this House on the leave side told leave voters that, if we left, we would be voting to leave the EU, not voting to leave Europe, and they promised that co-operation on trade and in areas like science, student exchanges and security would all continue. It is precisely that deal that the Prime Minister has sought to negotiate, but when she brought the deal to this House, many colleagues raised the issue of the backstop. It was not just the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) who raised the issue of the backstop; it was also raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), the former Chief Whip, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), the esteemed former Defence Secretary. They all raised the issue of the backstop. [Interruption.]

Hello, Father Christmas. [Laughter.] Actually this is not a time for laughter. [Interruption.] Mr Speaker, Father Christmas was behind you. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I understand the merriment, but I want to hear the hon. Lady.

Vicky Ford: If possible, I would like a little extra time for that.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I hopes it is a genuine point of order, and not a point of frustration.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Is it in order for Father Christmas to save Brexit?

Vicky Ford: During this debate, even my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Sir Graham Brady), the chair of the 1922 committee, urged the Brexit Secretary and the Prime Minister, in the strongest possible terms, to redouble their efforts to get reassurance on the backstop. Our Prime Minister has gone back to ask EU leaders to work again on the backstop, because Members of this Parliament instructed her to do so. Hard Brexit brings real risk, and rejecting the referendum result also brings real risk.

The proposals from the Labour Front Bench promising the exact same benefits as the single market without the obligations are fantasy fiction. This is not a game. The risks faced by our constituents are real. I urge Members on both sides of the Chamber to stop criticising our country’s negotiators. Members should roll up their sleeves, wrap a cold towel around their head and work out what sort of deal they can support, because unless we find support for a deal, our constituents and our neighbours across Europe will never forgive us.

4.49 pm

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I made it clear to my constituents that I would not be supporting the Prime Minister’s deal. The deal locks us into purgatory, and a few added pages in the appendix will not change that. Whether we said yes or no to Brexit, nobody voted for this.

How can we believe anything this Government say? Yesterday played out the Prime Minister’s contempt for Parliament and for the people we represent. It is their Parliament she smothers and ignores. Her humiliation now risks becoming the country’s humiliation. In what possible scenario do her latest actions help us negotiate a better deal, as we step closer to a no deal? But I fear a more cynical move in the Government’s motives. After running the clock down, and two years of excluding the country from making a deal together, the Prime Minister refuses to express the realities of Brexit compared with its rhetoric and will not say when the meaningful vote will be—or, indeed, whether it will be either meaningful or a vote. Threatening no deal if it is not her deal is a confection. Such an approach is straight out of a mis-selling scandal; it is, “Take this now or lose everything. Now or nothing. No other choice”, but it will not wash.

Far from taking back control, the Prime Minister stands in the way of control. Britain said yes and no to Brexit. Some 3,000 leavers and remainers in my constituency have taken my Brexit survey, with an 80% combined view that the public or Parliament should have a final say on the deal, compared with just 11% for the Prime Minister. I understand sentiments such as, “Why aren’t we there yet?” or, “Get on with it”, but this is too important to lose patience with. It is too important to be told, “Time’s up, everyone out.” The Prime Minister has not united the country because she cannot unite it with the approach she has taken on the one job she had. She should bring her deal back to Parliament next week, concede the vote and have Parliament decide what is next, including whether we should ask for further instruction from the people. If she cannot sell her deal, it is not worth buying, but all efforts now must be to activate this place, our Parliament, to protect against a no deal.

4.51 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): After the referendum, I had several public meetings with my constituents and they told me that they thought we should have a cross-party negotiating team. The Prime Minister’s strategic process error has been the failure to
build consensus across party, across the House and across the country, culminating yesterday in pulling the vote. It is simply wrong for her to threaten us with a catastrophe if we do not accept her approach. Constantly prioritising the unity of the Tory party and pandering to the European Research Group was doomed to fail; they are happy with no deal—they have already stashed their cash overseas.

So what should we do now? I am not going to say that everything in the Prime Minister’s deal is bad. Some colleagues say that it is too late for a renegotiation, but I am not sure about that. We should take a leaf out of Leo Varadkar’s book and change the red lines, most obviously the obsession with the ECJ. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said that those of us who wanted to stay in the customs union, which is very popular with the public, needed to be honest that that would mean common regulation. Quite honestly, I am happy to stay in the social chapter, with the environmental standards, and the industrialists in my constituency tell me that they want the European Medicines Agency and the European customs agency. Furthermore, this would make a significant difference to our European partners, because they are worried about regulatory arbitrage: that we are going to compete with them unfairly by cutting regulations and red tape.

I must confess that I am nervous of the Norway option, because it means free movement without getting a seat at the table. We must avoid a catastrophic no deal. If that means we need to have a people’s vote in the end, so be it. I do not believe it is undemocratic to vote again. The truth of the matter is that we all know more than we did two and a half years ago. But I have a warning to the super-remainers as well: staying in the EU will not mean everything in the economic garden is lovely. We must do more for people on low pay. For example, we need to strengthen the trade unions.

4.54 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I was one of the MPs down to speak yesterday, on what should have been the fourth day of the debate on the withdrawal agreement. Hundreds of constituents have contacted me about the agreement, with the vast majority—some 81%—urging me to vote against it. I wanted to articulate in my speech in that debate the reasons why the people I represent are so worried. They are concerned about jobs, the economy, security and our international reputation. I did not get my chance, though, and my constituents were denied a voice because, as we all know, yesterday’s debate just did not happen. I represent a constituency in which the majority—60%—voted to leave the EU in the referendum, yet the Prime Minister has achieved what seemed impossible two and a half years ago: she has united both sides of the referendum debate in Heywood and Middleton in opposition to her deal.

We have a Government in chaos. Last week, they were found to be in contempt of Parliament, but it seems that that means nothing. The Government have just carried on regardless. There is no clarity about when the debate will be resumed and the meaningful vote held. In a letter to her MPs on 25 November, the Prime Minister said that she had “negotiated the best possible Brexit deal for the whole United Kingdom. It is now for MPs to decide: back this deal and honour the referendum result...or vote against it and take us back to square one”.

She also said: “EU leaders have made it clear today that this is the only deal on the table.” That was two weeks ago, so what has changed? How has the “best possible Brexit deal” and the “only deal” morphed into something over which the Prime Minister is now trailing around Europe seeking reassurances?

The Prime Minister said that to vote against the deal would take us back to square one. Well, square one seems a better place to be than where we are now. Right now, we are not even on the board.

4.56 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Seventy years ago, at the beginning of 1948, Czechoslovakia stood as the only democracy in eastern Europe. By the end of that 12-month period, it had slipped into becoming a totalitarian satellite state of the Soviet Union—not by force, but instead by political actors who casually discarded democracy as the days turned by. All of which was, of course, egged on by the power of a foreign nation. That is not to say that we face the same dark fate that Czechoslovakia faced, but the background music does not bode well. Indeed, it raises significant alarm bells.

We have had, up to now, Government-supporting newspapers calling judges enemies of the people; Conservative Members using the language of treachery and some even casting doubt on your neutrality, Mr Speaker; and MPs accusing sitting judges of political activism. This is the language of a despot, whether they like it or not. Not once have the Government lifted a single finger to come to the defence of the right of judges or Members of Parliament to go about their business freely, in the way the public rightly expect them to do so.

The truth is that Parliament has become an irritant to this Government. They behave like a tin-pot republic with a Queen on the throne. They have tried to frustrate Parliament here in this House using arcane procedures or, indeed, in the courts. We even had the extraordinary scenes of the UK Government taking the Scottish Parliament to court over the passing of their own Brexit continuity legislation. We now have a Government who hobble from Division to Division, wondering every day whether it might well be their last—and so they should.

I welcome any opportunity to highlight the Government’s failings—

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thought my hon. Friend might welcome that opportunity! Is not the irony in all this that the Brexit referendum was supposed to be about taking back control, but in fact power has been seized by Whitehall?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Parliament is finally starting to assert itself, and rightly so.

I welcome any opportunity to highlight the miserable failings of this Government, but this debate today is no substitute for a vote of no confidence. We have a Government who have gone from dying on their feet to quite literally dying on their knees by the hour. This is not the time for pusillanimous opposition from the Opposition Front Bench. What is needed is real leadership. What is needed is a motion of no confidence. The right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) can
grin and stare over his glasses all he likes, but he should bring that no-confidence vote forward and the SNP Members will see him in the Lobby.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The Leader of the Opposition will be called no later than 5.3 pm.

5 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald). I strongly agree with him that, often, we recognise democracy only in its breach.

The Government’s decision to prevent this House from voting on and debating their deal is reckless and ideological. It is reckless because it pushes that vote closer towards the no-deal deadline, and it is ideological because the Government have chosen to focus on criticism from just one perspective—those who dislike the backstop—not least the ERG group on their own Buck Benches. Yet there are far more significant problems with this deal—problems that hundreds of my constituents have contacted me about and that I would have had the chance to articulate had the Government not pulled the debate and vote on these measures.

First, the deal guarantees no long-term certainty for customs arrangements, which is so important for firms such as BMW at Cowley in my constituency with a highly complex supply chain. Secondly, it fails to secure processes for regulatory alignment in the future, so no block on our country becoming the polluted, precariously employed, deregulated man of Europe. Finally, we still have no certainty for our EU friends and neighbours. I have still had no response from the Prime Minister about whether failure to exercise EEA treaty rights could be used to deny settled status, and we still have no certainty over immigration procedures for the scientists, researchers, doctors, nurses and other workers who are so desperately needed in my constituency and, indeed, across our country.

The Government should be seeking to build consensus on these and other issues, not tacking to the political right. If this Government cannot or will not renegotiate the deal in a sensible rather than ideological direction and they are not willing to stand aside then they should not rule out any option to inject democracy into this process.

I counsel Members in this House to exercise caution. I have heard some Members, and even some Ministers, describe another referendum as “a politicians’ vote” even though they know that it may turn out to be the only route to take to resolve an otherwise irresolvable impasse. I have heard others castigate what they call an elite establishment that they form part of themselves. Yet there are far more significant problems with this deal—problems that hundreds of my constituents have contacted me about and that I would have had the chance to articulate had the Government not pulled the debate and vote on these measures.

First, the deal guarantees no long-term certainty for customs arrangements, which is so important for firms such as BMW at Cowley in my constituency with a highly complex supply chain. Secondly, it fails to secure processes for regulatory alignment in the future, so no block on our country becoming the polluted, precariously employed, deregulated man of Europe. Finally, we still have no certainty for our EU friends and neighbours. I have still had no response from the Prime Minister about whether failure to exercise EEA treaty rights could be used to deny settled status, and we still have no certainty over immigration procedures for the scientists, researchers, doctors, nurses and other workers who are so desperately needed in my constituency and, indeed, across our country.

The Government should be seeking to build consensus on these and other issues, not tacking to the political right. If this Government cannot or will not renegotiate the deal in a sensible rather than ideological direction and they are not willing to stand aside then they should not rule out any option to inject democracy into this process.

I counsel Members in this House to exercise caution. I have heard some Members, and even some Ministers, describe another referendum as “a politicians’ vote” even though they know that it may turn out to be the only route to take to resolve an otherwise irresolvable impasse. I have heard others castigate what they call an elite establishment that they form part of themselves.

Last week, we saw the Leave.EU campaign present George Soros, of all people, as part of an imaginary conspiracy to thwart Brexit. The unpleasant insinuation was very clear. Members in this place must not allow themselves to become carriers for those seeking to stoke division among the British people. The rise in hate crime that has scarred our communities must be stemmed and we, with our privilege of political power, must never shirk our responsibility to reject that hate.

5.3 pm

Jeremy Corbyn: I called this debate because we should be having the proper vote this evening at 7 o’clock. Instead, the Prime Minister has disappeared, allegedly looking for assurances somewhere, and all of her Ministers here are incapable of telling us when the actual vote will be. Is it to be next week? Is it to be 21 January? When will it be?

What we have had over the past two and a half years is a Government exercising their contempt for Parliament by the legislation that they have brought forward, with its proliferation of Henry VIII clauses, culminating, historically, in a vote by this House finding them to be in contempt of Parliament itself.

The purpose of this motion today was to allow this House to express its anger at the way in which the Government have treated it. It has also provided a way for many Members on both sides of the House to express their concerns. There is not much support for the Government’s strategy here, not much support for the way that the Prime Minister has run away from this particular issue. Parliament needs to assert itself. This Government are in contempt of Parliament. They are not taking Parliament seriously and are in danger of leading us into a no-deal cliff-edge Brexit, which will be incredibly damaging for the whole country. Today Parliament needs to assert itself. Tomorrow the Government need either to bring a vote here, or to get out of the way and let somebody else take this issue seriously and negotiate properly on behalf of this country.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 0, Noes 299.

Division No. 276

[5.4 pm]

Tellers for the Ayes: Mr Alan Campbell and Nick Smith

AYES

Brown, Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, r h Liam
Cable, r h Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, r h Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, r h Yvette
Corbyn, r h Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, r h Sir Kevin
Beckett, r h Margaret
Benn, r h Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, r h Mr Ben
Brake, r h Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn

Brown, r h Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, r h Liam
Cable, r h Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, r h Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, r h Yvette
Corbyn, r h Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
Day, Martyn
de Cordova, Marsha
de Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
 Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gelhins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendy, Drew
Hepburn, rh Sir Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holker, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Sir George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, James
Jones, Ms Karen
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mel
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Sir Norman
Lammy, rh Sir David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Olive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Linden, David
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Lloyd Neve, Angela
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh Sir John
McFadden, rh Sir Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Sir Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melaine
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Toby
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Philpason, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmine
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, Iain
Sadler, Ben
Sadiq Khan, Mr
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sheriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobell, Alex
Souby, rh Sir John
Spellar, rh Sir John
Starmore, rh Sir Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Vaz, rh Sir Keith
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishart, Pete
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:

Vicky Foxcroft and
Nic Dakin

Question accordingly negatived.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP):
On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am reluctant to raise this point of order, having spoken to you about it at the side of the Chair earlier. I should say that I have given the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner), who is the subject of the point of order, advance notice of it by email and, a few minutes ago, in person.

During proceedings earlier, when the Leader of the Opposition was opening his emergency debate, he took an intervention from a Democratic Unionist party Member, the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), and during the response of the Leader of the Opposition, I said to my colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), that I wished the Leader of the Opposition would answer a question.
That prompted the hon. Member for Bolsover to turn around to me and call me “a piece of shit”. He then went on to defend that, telling a journalist that he was just putting me in his place.

As you know, Mr Speaker, I had no desire to raise this formally with you—[Interruption.] If Members will listen, they will learn something. I had hoped to deal with it informally, as you suggested. However, given that the hon. Gentleman shows no sign of having any regret about it, will you reaffirm that it is wrong? Will you reaffirm that Members on both sides should be able to go about this place without being at the tail end of that kind of abuse?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. I did counsel that this matter should best be addressed outside the Chamber, perhaps through the usual channels. What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is twofold. First, I hope he will understand that, although I am not in any sense arguing the toss with him or disputing the veracity of what he has said, I was not there and I do not know. I would not presume to comment on a conversation that I did not hear. That is the first point.

The second point is really underscored—over decades, if not centuries—by successive editions of “Erskine May”. In essence, it is this: at this place’s best, moderation and good humour are the defining features of parliamentary conduct. We should be able to disagree with each other agreeably or reasonably agreeably. I do not favour anybody being abused.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will understand if I say that I have a very high regard for him, but I have known the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) for 21 years and I hold him in the highest esteem. I am not going to stand here and criticise a Member from the Chair for conduct that I did not witness. I have made the overall point, and I think it would be best if I leave it there. I appreciate that the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) has raised his concern, if that was what he felt he had to do. May we leave it there for today? Thank you.

If there are no further points of order, we come now to the Ivory Bill (Programme) (No. 3) motion—[Interruption.] Order. I am sure the House is extremely interested in this motion, as of course it should be.

IVORY BILL (PROGRAMME) (NO. 3)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Ivory Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Orders of 4 June 2018 (Ivory Bill (Programme)) and 4 July 2018 (Ivory Bill (Programme) (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement at today’s sitting.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—[Dr Thérèse Coffey.]

Question agreed to.

Ivory Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Clause 2

PRE-1918 ITEMS OF OUTSTANDING ARTISTIC ETC VALUE AND IMPORTANCE

5.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to consider Lords amendments 2 to 78.

Dr Coffey: It is my great pleasure to be able to open Commons consideration of Lords amendments to the Ivory Bill.

I thank the House for its kindness while I recovered from my illness, and particularly the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Maclesfield (David Rutley), who has successfully taken the legislation through to this stage. The Bill is already having an impact internationally, with action on ivory sales now being consulted on or committed to in Cambodia, Laos and Singapore, while the Australian Parliament’s federal inquiry into ivory urged the Australian Government to follow the UK’s approach, which it described as “a model of best practice.”

The Government made a number of amendments to the Bill during its passage through the other place, in response to the Committees of that House and individual peers. Following careful consideration of the reports of the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee and the Constitution Committee, the Government tabled a number of amendments to address the concerns raised. The Government also tabled amendments on conclusion of its consultation with the devolved Administrations, to recognise the devolved aspects of the Bill, and in response to concerns raised in the other place over matters of insurance. In setting out the reasoning behind the Lords amendments today, I will focus my remarks on the effect of the amendments. I should point out that many minor and consequential amendments are a direct consequence of the substantive amendments.

The first amendments I will turn to in this group concern powers to make regulations. Amendments 1, 5, 7, 8, 18, 20 and 66 reflect recommendations made by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee. One of the recommendations was that negative resolution regulations should be used instead of guidance to set out certain matters. Amendments 1, 5, 8 and 18 have been made to replace references to guidance with regulations. Amendment 1 refers to the Secretary of State’s power to specify any other matters, in addition to rarity and importance, that experts should take into account when assessing an item for exemption under clause 2. Such other matters will now be specified in regulations, rather than guidance. Amendments 5, 8 and 18 will require that regulations rather than guidance are used to specify any additional information, beyond that already listed in the Bill, that an applicant must provide when applying for an exemption certificate under clause 2 or registration under clause 10 respectively.
Amendments 7 and 20 remove two powers to issue guidance. Those pieces of guidance would have set out how applications for exemption certificates and registrations must be made, for example requiring that applications be made electronically or online. The Government has decided to allow maximum flexibility with regard to how applications may be made, and therefore consider that these powers are no longer necessary. While we expect the majority of registrations to be made online, there will be the facility for owners to request forms by telephone or post. I would like to reassure the House that, while important details will be set out in regulations, the Government will also produce detailed information for users to explain the new system.

A second recommendation made by the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee was that the Government should include in the Bill more details about the appeals process. This appeals process is for appeals against the refusal or revocation of an exemption certificate applied for under clause 2. Amendments 10, 11, 13 and 14 provide these further details. The amendments name the first-tier tribunal as the appeal body and set out the main grounds for making an appeal, and the powers of the tribunal.

I turn to the amendments to the powers conferred on officers of the regulator. The Bill refers to these officers as “accredited civilian officers”, and I will do the same. Amendments 21 to 53, 58, 61 and 74 to 78 were made in response to concerns raised by the Constitution Committee, and by other peers, which was concerned about the powers of accredited civilian officers. The Government considered these concerns carefully and have put forward amendments 46 and 47 in response.

Those amendments create after clause 22 new clauses that confer powers of entry and other powers on accredited civilian officers. All other references to powers conferred on accredited civilian officers are to be removed from the Bill, ensuring that their role as assessors of compliance is clearly defined and separate from that of police and customs officers. That is a careful balance, as without accredited civilian officers the duty of assessing compliance would fall solely to the police.

As a result of the amendments, an accredited civilian officer would no longer have the power to enter a premises using a warrant. This will be available only to police and customs officers. An accredited civilian officer would, however, be able to enter a non-dwelling premises that they reasonably believe to be connected to ivory dealing, such as a shop or a warehouse, for the purpose of assessing compliance or if they reasonably believe that there is relevant evidence on that premises. They must give reasonable notice prior to entering.

5.30 pm

Having entered lawfully, the officer will have the power to examine items, for example if they believe that the item contains ivory, and the power to request documents such as exemption certificates or registrations. Also, if they were to identify an item or document that they believed to be relevant evidence of an offence, they will have the power to seize that item or document. I can confirm that the accredited civilian officers will be officers of the Office for Product Safety and Standards. I hope that the House is assured that they would be able to carry out all the duties necessary for assessing compliance, ensuring proportionate but effective enforcement of the ban.

I now turn to Lords amendment 54, which deals with insurance transactions. The amendment would insert a new clause after clause 33 to ensure that any insurance policy for or covering an item containing ivory that is in existence before the prohibition on dealing comes into force is not affected by the Bill. It will also mean that the acquisition, or disposal, of an ivory item by a regulated insurer as the result of standard insurance activities will not be covered by the prohibition. The insurance company will not, however, be permitted to sell the item on to a third party, as opposed to returning it to the original owner, unless that item meets one of the categories of exemption and is registered or certified as such. The new clause also covers transactions between insurers and reinsurers.

The remaining Government amendments address devolved powers. In line with the devolution settlement, the UK Government have engaged each of the devolved Administrations from the outset. The Governments of Scotland and Wales have both expressed their support for the Ivory Bill. We have also engaged positively with the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. The two devolved Administrations issued legislative consent motions ahead of Third Reading in the House of Lords and the appropriate official procedure was also followed with respect to Northern Ireland. This engagement concluded that dealing in ivory items either within a devolved country or between a devolved country and another part of the UK is a devolved matter. The amendments therefore protect devolved interests by ensuring that most regulations under the Bill that apply in relation to Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland may be made only with the consent of Welsh Ministers, Scottish Ministers or the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland. The appropriate national authority would also have the power to make regulations, for example if they did not give consent for the Secretary of State to do so.

We agreed to a minor amendment, Lords amendment 16, which specifies Scottish Ministers as the appropriate body to publish a list of accredited museums. The change was requested by the Scottish Government as a reflection of the different status of Museums and Galleries Scotland to Arts Council England, and does not alter the effect of this provision.

Before closing, I reiterate my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield. I also thank my noble Friend Lord Gardiner for the work he did in the other place. I want to put on record our thanks to the many officials who worked on the Bill, and to the Opposition, who were very constructive in Committee and in taking it to this stage. I hope that I have explained to the House the effect of the Government amendments tabled in the other place. I have not referred to each of the 78 amendments individually as the majority are minor and consequential, but I hope that this House will agree with the other place that amendment 1 and amendments 2 to 78 be made.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Both the Asian and the African elephants are threatened with extinction. Just over 350,000 African elephants were counted in 2016, but that is over 100,000 fewer than in 2006. There is no reason to suppose that the number of elephants is not continuing to decline. The decline is almost certainly
due to poaching for ivory. No species can continue to lose numbers at that rate without eventually becoming extinct. Unless there is a step-change in the rate at which African elephants are being poached, there will not be any African elephants in the wild in 30 years or so. We cannot possibly stand by and see such an iconic creature become extinct.

CITES estimates that 40 tonnes of ivory were illegally traded in 2016, which is the highest ever recorded. If the trade continues, the poaching will continue. The UK needs to be at the forefront of measures to stop this trade, to prevent the illegal trade that comes through markets in the UK, to enable other countries to close loopholes that traders linked to this country can exploit, and to provide an example to others.

Despite the existing laws governing the ivory trade, the UK is still a major exporter of ivory products. So long as it is legal to trade in pre-1947 ivory without a permit, and to trade in post-1947 ivory with a permit, it becomes far easier for illegal traders to disguise their fresh ivory as antique. Thirty-one per cent. of the total EU exports of ivory items between 2005 and 2014 came from the United Kingdom, and we know that there is a substantial illegal trade, because seizures have continued, and indeed increased, between 2010 and 2014. All those facts led to the consultation that preceded the Bill, and the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) and the Minister made moral and consensual judgments in allowing and encouraging the evolution of the Bill.

The fundamental problem with the pre-existing legislation on the trade in ivory is that it gives far too wide an exemption for there to be any chance that the trade will come to an end. If, as is intended, the trade in fresh ivory is to cease completely, the expectation that there will be any legal supply of ivory also needs to cease. We need to close down the demand for ivory by rendering the whole trade morally, socially and legally unacceptable. In these circumstances, it is understandable that there are some who find any exemptions unacceptable. The Labour party would tend to support the narrowest scope of exemptions. However, during the Bill’s passage through the Lords, all the possible loosening or tightening of these exemptions has been debated, and it would be unhelpful to try to unpick any criteria now.

The Lords amendments that would make the operation of the Bill more effective are most crucial to achieving the closing down of the ivory trade, and we are pleased to see that these amendments are being proposed by the Government. It is entirely right that the details of the operation of the Bill should be laid down in regulations. It is sensible to limit the powers given to accredited civilian officers, and we wholeheartedly support the amendments that the Government have accepted. When there is an appeal against the refusal or revocation of an exemption certificate, it is sensible and effective for the appeal body to be the first-tier tribunal and for that to be on the face of the Bill. I put on record my party’s gratitude to all the Members of the upper House who have helped to steer this Bill through, and in particular, to Lord Gardiner of Kimble and Baroness Jones of Whitchurch.

One issue, however, was raised repeatedly before and during the passage of the Bill: other animal sources of ivory. For the purposes of the Bill, ivory is defined as being from elephants. There is a very real danger that the number of other animals killed for their ivory will increase to try to maintain a supply. This particularly relates to other animals in the CITES schedule of endangered wildlife: walruses, narwhals, hippopotamuses, orcas and sperm whales. We would argue that whether or not there is a consequential increase in the killing of these species, it is wrong and damaging to their chances of survival for trade in the ivory derived from these creatures to continue.

We all want the maximum protection for elephants to commence as soon as possible, so it would be unhelpful to make any attempt to disrupt the Bill’s progress now. However, the opportunity to extend the definition of ivory, and hence the range of species protected by the Bill, rests with the Secretary of State through the making of regulations under the affirmative procedure. We urge him to take that opportunity as soon as possible to cover all the relevant animals in the CITES schedule, as well as others, such as warthogs. Unicorns are apparently very popular at the moment, although, of course, they do not exist. What a terrible shame it would be if, because of our inaction, narwhals, whose horns quite possibly prompted the invention of the unicorn myth, were themselves to become non-existent.

All those who want to live in a world that possesses a rich variety of living animals will welcome the passage of the Bill. By passing it, this Parliament will be making a powerful statement that will carry weight throughout the world, but for that weight to have maximum impact, the Government must use all the instruments and influence at their disposal to persuade other countries to take a similarly strong stance, so that we can stamp out the international ivory trade for good.

I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Sue Hayman) on Second Reading. We must send a clear message at home and internationally that the only ivory we will value is that on a live elephant in the wild. I would like to see a world in which all those attributes that make our diverse species so varied and special—turtles’ shells, tigers’ stripes, ostrich feathers, butterflies’ wings—are appreciated in their proper place, as part of the living creature, and not by killing the animal and cutting off part of its body. We are taking an important step forward here today. Let us not stop with elephants.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is a privilege once again to speak on this historic Bill, and I am delighted to see the Minister back in her place, because she has contributed so much to its progress over such a long period. The Scottish National party welcomes that progress and the Lords amendments, which we believe offer clarity and strengthen the processes set out in the Bill. We are also extremely keen that through the Bill the UK continue to show best practice and leadership throughout the world on the work that has to be done to protect species.

We are working together to implement stringent measures to protect and conserve populations of elephants and other endangered species for future generations. The survival of the species is the most important thing and must be realised, so the Bill must be as strong as possible. I want to thank all the members of the Public
Bill Committee, who worked so consensually throughout the process. I consider my input into this important process to be one of my proudest achievements in Parliament so far, and I would like to thank everybody for their approach.

We heard compelling evidence in Committee about the unscrupulous nature of ivory poachers. They will stop at nothing, leaving no ivory-bearing species safe. In fact, they trade in death. They also undermine poor and vulnerable communities in developing parts of the world, moving from species to species to make their money. I would like to hear what work the Department for International Development is doing, and what expertise it can lend, to ensure that we protect those vulnerable communities, show leadership and protect people’s jobs and livelihoods, because poaching affects some of the most vulnerable and poorest people in our world.

My daughter has been doing a project in school on narwhals and is very interested in making sure we do all we can to protect not only elephants but narwhals and the other species impacted by ivory poaching. Like me, she would most definitely like to see progress made for all the species affected. The fact that young people are so engaged with this work shows how important it is to future generations and what an historic Bill this is.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on leading on this issue for the SNP. We are all pleased and proud to see the Bill, which was a manifesto commitment at the last election certainly for our party and, I believe, for other parties. It is important to many of my constituents that animal welfare issues are taken very seriously. As she highlights, the importance of that in developing countries cannot be overstated either. It is important that these creatures be protected for future generations, and it is good that there is consensus around the Bill, despite everything else that is happening in politics today.

Dr Cameron: I thank my hon. Friend for what he has said. I think that that is extremely important. This is a truly historic day, although not, perhaps, in the way that we expected it to be.

Scottish National party Members and our constituents throughout Scotland want the Bill to be as strong as possible, so we welcome the news that there will be regulations rather than guidance. We also welcome the clarity on the appeals process, and the clear and definitive guidance on the regulatory powers of the accredited civilian officers.

5.45 pm

I want to record my thanks for, and appreciation of, the consensual way in which the Secretary of State, the Minister and the Government in general have engaged with the devolved Governments, particularly the Scottish Government. A collaborative approach brings out the best in all our Parliaments. We want to ensure that the Bill has resonance throughout the United Kingdom and is applied as stringently as possible. We have worked extremely hard to reach this point. I thank all who have been involved for working so well together. I also pay special tribute to the voluntary and other organisations that work in animal welfare and have lent us their support, advice and expertise to ensure that the UK can proceed with the Bill, and that it is a historic development that will protect species for future generations.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I absolutely agree that that is nauseating. It is also nauseating that people post photographs of themselves engaging in so-called trophy hunting. As for the right hon. Gentleman’s other point, it is not really a question of whether we agree or disagree. I am attending the debate because I agree with the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) said. The Chamber should be much fuller than it is at the moment. As she said, what we are doing here is historic. She mentioned her daughter; unfortunately, for me it is grandchildren. As I have asked in other debates, are we to be the generation that sees the obliteration of our planet of some of the most remarkable species that have ever existed? Today we are debating the elephant, but what will people be saying in 20 or 30 years’ time? Every year 20,000 African elephants are poached and slaughtered just for their ivory. The Bill relates to our own country, of course, but hopefully it will act as an inspiration and a lead for other countries.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Is it not the case that the Chamber is normally full when we disagree and often empty when we agree with each other? There is an upside to the fact that there are not many Members in the Chamber: the Bill is proceeding by agreement.

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is something nauseating about a person who would slaughter an endangered animal to produce a trinket?

Vernon Coaker: I agree that that is nauseating. It is also nauseating that people post photographs of themselves engaging in so-called trophy hunting. As for the right hon. Gentleman’s other point, it is not really a question of whether we agree or disagree. I am attending the debate because I agree with the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) said. The Chamber should be much fuller than it is at the moment. As she said, what we are doing here is historic. She mentioned her daughter; unfortunately, for me it is grandchildren. As I have asked in other debates, are we to be the generation that sees the obliteration of our planet of some of the most remarkable species that have ever existed? Today we are debating the elephant, but what will people be saying in 20 or 30 years’ time? Every year 20,000 African elephants are poached and slaughtered just for their ivory. The Bill relates to our own country, of course, but hopefully it will act as an inspiration and a lead for other countries.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): We have a degree of unity in this debate, and I think we all agree about this elephant ivory Bill, but those of us who were on the Bill Committee and who spoke in previous stages in the House argue that the protection is not the same for the other species we talked about—I mentioned the narwhal in Committee and in the House, and there is also the rhino, the walrus and others. Is it not a failure that we are not including all those species in the Bill?

Vernon Coaker: Of course that is a weakness in the Bill, but the Minister and our Front-Bench spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin),
mentioned—this is my understanding, too—that the Secretary of State has committed to consulting on extending it to other species. I say to the Secretary of State that this is urgent. Public consultation can take a year or two years before the Government review it. I say to the Secretary of State—I know that he and I agree on this issue, if not others—that there is an urgency about this and we have to get a move on.

I say to our own country and the world that we need to wake up. If we do not wake up, our children, our grandchildren and our great-grandchildren will say to the Secretary of State, to my hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench, and to me and other Members here, “What were you doing? What did you do? How did you stop this?” And everybody will say, “Well, it’s terrible and awful and a disgrace.” That is not good enough—we all need to use the sickening feeling we have to demand more of ourselves and this Parliament.

The last point I want to make is that today and other days have obviously been dominated by discussions about Brexit, but our constituents often ask us what else is happening while that debate is going on. I hope that at least some of the comments made in the Chamber about the important step forward being taken through the Bill will be reported, and that some of the young people out there—whether in the school of the daughter of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, my grandchildren’s school or others—will learn that this Parliament has been listening and trying to do what we can to ensure that the great animals, including elephants, are saved for future generations.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I also welcome the move to put this legislation in place, and I welcome the Lords amendments, but for those of us who served on the Bill Committee there are still some questions, which were referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin). I want to ask about some of the things I was banging on about during the previous stages of the Bill. First, we talked about the enforcement of the legislation, particularly in respect of online sales, which can be difficult. Secondly, I would like to know about the future funding of the National Wildlife Crime Unit after 2020. Can the Minister give us some clarity and assurances on that? Most importantly, as other Members have mentioned, there is the question of when the Government expect to launch the consultation on extending the scope of the Bill to animals such as hippos and narwhals. If we really want to end the trade in ivory it is imperative that there be no debate about what kind of ivory it is and whether it is covered by this Bill. I urge the Secretary of State to clarify that point.

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): I also welcome the Bill and congratulate the Government on bringing it forward, and our Front-Bench team as well, but I think everybody would say that it is just a step in the right direction and there is still a huge amount of work to do. We know about legal trophy hunting, and I would like the Government to clamp down on individuals who are still offering tours on safari to take out these wonderful beasts. I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) said: there is an imperative on our generation to stop this. We all know of American tourists who come over here—I had the misfortune once of meeting somebody who said, “My daughter’s into hunting, you should see what she’s taken down”, and showed me sick photos of bloodied beautiful bears and lions that she had killed in the Serengeti and elsewhere in Africa. That has to stop, and I hope that the Government will look again at this issue.

I also hope that the Government will go beyond the ivory trade and look at other wonderful animals, including whales. I hope that they will ban items such as whales’ teeth, for example. I hope that they will create a real stigma around trophy hunters, so that when people show trophy hunting pictures others will find them sick and distressing. I am picking on Americans here, but I have seen elected officials with pictures on their walls of hunts that they have taken part in. That has to stop.

I hope the Government will also recognise that this trade is bringing about criminality and mafia practices. I must have been the first person to introduce discussion about the ivory trade. I hope that this is just the start of a wider debate, that the consultation will be short and that the Government will bring forward extra legislation very soon to ban trophy hunting and the companies that send people on hunting tours.

Dr Coffey: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to the hon. Members who have asked questions about various elements of the amendments. First, I should like to say that 11 December will linger in my mind because we have now reached this stage, and I hope that once the House has agreed to these amendments, Her Majesty will give us Royal Assent very soon. I also want to commiserate the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, who has really been pushing this agenda. Indeed, he is now the chair of the Ivory Alliance 2024, a global organisation that is trying to ensure that this kind of legislation can be spread around the world in order to stamp out the demand for ivory totally.

The hon. Members for Ipswich (Sandy Martin) and for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) asked about other species. We have committed to gathering evidence on the trade in ivory from other species as soon as is practicable after Royal Assent. It is important to state that any extension of the Bill through secondary legislation needs to be robust and evidence-based, and also that our original consultation was only on elephant ivory, so we will need to ensure that we consult appropriately and get the full evidence before deciding on the next steps. It is also fair to say that, while we have not been too presumptuous, we have already initiated all the work that needs to be done to get that further work under way. The IT projects are under way, for example, and we are working on other elements, although we have not yet started writing the secondary legislation referred to in the Lords amendments that the House will be voting on today.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) asked about international elements of this. We should be proud of our record around the world on these matters, and the Government agree about the importance of sustaining and supporting work to suppress demand and ensuring that we proactively fund a range of training for anti-poaching efforts. We also acknowledge the importance of supporting sustainable livelihoods in the communities affected. The Department’s illegal wildlife trade challenge fund has supported 47 projects.
with a value of more than £40 million in developing countries, and we continue to work not only with the Department for International Development but with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence on those activities. We also continue to make the case in the European Union for doing even more.

The hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) asked about enforcement in relation to online sales. The Bill has been drafted from the outset with online and physical sales in mind. It prohibits commercial activities involving ivory, regardless of where those activities take place. Clause 12 makes it an offence to facilitate the breaching of the ban, and that could cover online sales forums that allow sellers to advertise items, make contact with buyers and accept payments. She also asked about the National Wildlife Crime Unit. Our Department currently co-funds that unit with the Home Office and the police. She will be aware that we have to agree our spending review for future commitments, but I know that the NWCU is highly valued and I am sure that we will want to continue to see its work proceed.

I hope that I have outlined to the hon. Member for Gedling (Vernon Coaker) the actions that are already under way, and I agree with him that this will be an important piece of legislation. The Bill is so important, and I am very pleased to have been part of it. The House should take great pride in it and in ensuring that we continue to save wildlife, wherever it may be.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.
Lords amendments 2 to 78 agreed to.

Fuel Poverty

6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): I beg to move,

That this House has considered fuel poverty.

I hope that no Members will leave the Chamber during such an important debate. I have just spilt a glass of water over the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and I apologise. [ Interruption. ] Yes, it is not the worst thing that has happened to Members today from what I have heard.

Fuel poverty is debated annually in the House. Let me give some background to that. Our 2015 fuel poverty strategy for England committed us to ensuring appropriate parliamentary scrutiny as we take action to tackle fuel poverty. That commitment to transparency is why we created the Committee on Fuel Poverty and why we hold the annual debates.

The problem of fuel poverty crosses party lines and needs action from many different stakeholders. I welcome all contributions today and the positive way in which I know they will be made. I am looking at the shadow spokesman when saying that and pleading with her to show her usual grace and dignity in opposing me.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I am afraid that the Minister cannot expect quite so much grace and dignity from me—I apologise. To be serious, there is good reason to be deeply concerned about the fuel poverty statistics because we have just heard from the Office for National Statistics that last winter, the figure for premature winter deaths exceeded 50,000—the highest for more than 40 years. With respect, the Government are not doing anything near enough on fuel poverty, and I want to put that on the record at the beginning of the debate.

Richard Harrington: I would ascribe grace and dignity to the hon. Lady’s usual contributions. This is a serious matter. The hon. Lady is right that last winter’s severely cold weather included wind-chill factors of minus 10° C and I accept what she says about the statistics. However, I do not accept her assertion that the Government have done nothing about that. If she will bear with me for the rest of my contribution, I will answer her point, and if I do not, I am sure that she will intervene.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that the Minister will say something about rural areas. Fuel poverty is one of the biggest problems for rural areas because of the nature of the properties, which are often older, with older people living in them, but also because the schemes do not reach them. In particular, the energy company obligation—ECO—has completely failed and I hope that the Minister will say something about that. It is a tragedy that people in rural areas are more likely to die early because of fuel poverty.

Richard Harrington: I will indeed mention that. Various groups have lobbied all Members of Parliament to contribute to the debate and I agree with the basis of what they say.
It is also fair to say that fuel poverty is a devolved matter and that the debate originates from the fuel poverty strategy for England.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Richard Harrington: If the hon. Lady gives me a second, I hope that I will mention the point that she was about to make. Fuel poverty is a problem across the United Kingdom. I am sure that we all have constituents who struggle to keep their homes warm during the winter. The weather has no borders and does not understand devolved legislation. I am sure that the hon. Lady will confirm that.

Patricia Gibson: The Minister has said that measures to tackle fuel poverty have been devolved. The real drivers of fuel poverty are the high cost of fuel—the tax on which is reserved, as he knows—and, of course, people simply not having enough money. We know about the hardship that universal credit is causing, so I would say that the real and fundamental causes of fuel poverty are very much in the power of this Government to tackle, beyond energy efficiency measures.

Richard Harrington: I agree with the hon. Lady. The Government have many different strategies, and energy efficiency measures are one of them. The importance of working together with the devolved authorities on this issue was never in more evidence than during last winter’s beast from the east—I see the hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) is not in his seat. As temperatures plunged, many households throughout the UK faced broken boilers and frozen pipes. The sustained cold weather made it even more difficult for those on the lowest incomes and in the worst properties to be able to heat their home.

As has been mentioned, last month the Office for National Statistics reported there were 50,000 excess winter deaths last winter. The figure was said by the ONS to be unusually high because of multiple causes, including the virulent strain of flu, the relative ineffectiveness of the influenza vaccine and the colder than average winter temperatures. However, old, inefficient and cold homes, combined with occupants who are vulnerable to the impact of living in a cold home, certainly have been a factor.

The fabric of our building stock cannot continue to be a source of ill health. We have put in place an ambitious framework to tackle this issue, based on energy efficiency being the best long-term solution to tackle fuel poverty.

Caroline Lucas: I do not know how the Minister can say he has put in place something that is so ambitious when no public funds are going into domestic fuel poverty and energy efficiency, for the first time in years. In the past we had Warm Front and other schemes, but right now the Government are putting no taxpayers’ money into these schemes.

Richard Harrington: I respectfully disagree with the hon. Lady, and I will outline the £3 billion-worth of Government help.

Our 2017 clean growth strategy sets an ambition of improving as many homes as possible to energy performance certificate band C by 2035, wherever practical, cost-effective and affordable, but the truth is that the most vulnerable must be helped first. We are committed to improving the homes of the fuel poor to band C five years earlier, by 2030, and we have set interim milestones to keep us on track. As many fuel-poor homes as reasonably practical will be improved to band E by 2020, and to band D by 2025.

A key way in which we are delivering energy efficiency measures to meet that ambition is through the energy company obligation, which has led to energy efficiency upgrades to nearly 2 million homes across England, Scotland and Wales since 2013. Recognising the need to support low-income and vulnerable households first, we have taken action to ensure that ECO is targeted at those who need it most.

When the scheme was first introduced in 2013, 30% of ECO spending was focused on addressing fuel poverty, and by 2015 it had been increased to 70%. Today 100% of the energy company obligation is focused directly on low-income and vulnerable households, and we have introduced a new innovative element that will bring down the long-term cost of low-carbon measures.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): The ECO programme has been very successful indeed, but does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just the barrier technologies of insulation in roofs and better windows, doors and floors that make a difference but the introduction of clean tech in homes? Clean tech can often deliver significant savings, too, so I hope that, as a result of the recent consultation, things like smart thermostats will now be included in the ECO catalogue.

Richard Harrington: As usual, my hon. Friend is well informed and well spoken on this subject. I share his hope, and he makes a significant point. I hope he will see this come to pass.

We are also clear that landlords should play a role in upgrading the energy efficiency of the properties they rent out. The private sector regulations will require landlords to improve the energy efficiency of band F and band G properties so that their tenants will be living in properties rated band E or above by 2020. We expect that these regulations, which require landlords to invest up to £3,500 on their property, will enable all privately rented F and G properties to receive support, and about half of these homes will be improved to an energy performance level of band E. This action to tackle the worst homes first—those rated F or G—is consistent with the approach set out in our fuel poverty strategy, but we will be consulting on options to ensure rental properties are improved to the band C target level by 2030. The private rental sector has to make its contribution as well.

We recognise that long-term sustainable solutions such as the ones I have mentioned are little comfort to those who are cold now. It is important to complement this approach with more immediate support, which is why we extended the warm home discount to 2021, so that it can continue to provide more than 2 million low-income and vulnerable households with a £140 rebate off their energy bill each winter.
Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): The Minister is talking about taking immediate action. It is some time now since the Dieter Helm review came out with a number of recommendations to sort out the chaos of the subsidies going into the alternative energy business, which would take the cost pressure off the most vulnerable households. The Minister does not look as though he has read it. Its approach would take the pressure off the most vulnerable households, so why do the Government not respond and implement those recommendations?

Richard Harrington: I will make one small change to what the hon. Gentleman said, in that I have read that report and I have met Dieter Helm. I will happily send the hon. Gentleman a copy of the recent energy speech that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made. If the hon. Gentleman does not have a copy, I will send it to him with my compliments—I might even get the Secretary of State to sign it for him for Christmas.

We extended the warm home discount to 2021, so that it can continue to provide more than 2 million low-income and vulnerable households with a £140 rebate off their energy bill each winter. In addition, the winter fuel payments provide all pension households—people of pension age in the households—with additional financial support worth up to £300. Cold weather payments also provide relief to the elderly, the vulnerable and those who need extra support with their fuel bills during spells of cold weather. Last year, that alone provided an estimated £98 million in cold weather payments to keep people warm in vulnerable households.

James Heappey: The Minister, or at least the Treasury, will know who receives cold weather payments. Is any measure taken of the energy-efficiency of the homes in which those recipients live and therefore of whether, rather than just spending money every time the weather is cold, we might improve the energy-efficiency of those properties and so reduce the requirement for those payments to be received in the future?

Richard Harrington: If it is acceptable to my hon. Friend, I will write to him on that subject, because I need to speak to the Treasury about its analysis, which is what his question is about.

We are providing all consumers, including the fuel poor, with more control over their bills. The smart meter programme will mean millions of customers will be in control of their energy use, helping them to save money. A new safeguard tariff coming into effect on 1 January will protect 11 million consumers from high bills. On average, households will save £76 a year, with some saving a lot more. Significantly, as a result of these measures, the average fuel poverty gap has decreased from £379 in 2011 to £326 in 2016. Over that five-year period, the total fuel poverty gap has decreased by £88 million in real terms. Although it is important to recognise that progress is being made, we acknowledge that we still have a long way to go. The clean growth strategy included an ambitious set of policies for homes, the extension of energy-efficiency support through to 2028 and at least £640 million per year. We will be reviewing what the best form of support this will be in 2022, and I would welcome the views on this topic of hon. Members here today.

We will update the fuel poverty strategy for England in 2019, and we look forward to receiving good ideas on how we can make further progress. The new strategy will align our work on fuel poverty with our clean growth strategy and industrial strategy. We had always planned for the fuel poverty strategy to be a living, evolving document, because changing technology and innovation will mean that what worked in the past will not necessarily be the best plan for the future.

Graham Stringer: Will the Minister explain to the House why, as smart meters are rolled out in the north of England, we are not getting the most up-to-date and best smart meters, which people in Watford are getting? Why is the north being discriminated against?

Richard Harrington: I thank the hon. Gentleman for saying that my constituents in Watford are doing well out of smart meters, and they are, but the pace of the expansion is under continual review with the suppliers. The Secretary of State’s powers were extended in the recent Smart Meters Act 2018 and will be used to encourage take-up of smart meters, which is gathering momentum. I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point, though, because it is patchy in different parts of the country.

The main point is that for the first time we have an opportunity to ensure that our fuel poverty strategy is joined up with our holistic plan to improve energy efficiency throughout Britain. The new strategy will focus on better ways of identifying those in fuel poverty and targeting our assistance to them directly. It will help us to identify the most cost-effective means of achieving our target in 2020, 2025 and 2030.

Let me bring the focus back to our main goal, which is to improve the lives of those in fuel poverty. No one deserves to live in a cold home. We have the opportunity next year to set out a refreshed fuel poverty strategy that will lay out an updated plan for meeting the 2030 target. I would welcome hon. Members’ views based on their experience of fuel poverty, so that we can work together to set out a new, ambitious plan. This issue transcends party lines and affects us all. I look forward to hearing hon. Members’ questions and contributions on this topic.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The House will be aware that this is a necessarily short debate. I hope that we will manage without a formal time limit, but I advise Members who wish to take part to prepare around five minutes of speaking notes, and no more.

6.17 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): As we enter another winter, I welcome the opportunity to stand opposite the Minister in what will hopefully be a collegiate debate. I regret, though, the urgent necessity once again to debate fuel poverty in this Chamber.

Fuel poverty epitomises what a UN statement recently described as the “great misery” that has been “inflicted unnecessarily” on the UK’s poor, and in particular on the millions of children locked into a cycle of poverty. The UK is one of the world’s largest and wealthiest economies, with all the means at its disposal to eliminate
fuel poverty, and yet it is not being eliminated. The latest data shows there were more households living in fuel poverty in England in 2016 than in 2015. The figures were higher in 2015 than in 2014, when in turn they were higher than in 2013. It is not just the extent of fuel poverty that is on the rise, but the depth of fuel poverty—that is, the difference between households’ energy bills and what they can afford to pay. Fuel poverty is not only persisting, but getting worse. Members should be in no doubt that this is not an unavoidable fact of life. It is a political choice.

According to the Office for National Statistics, the number of excess winter deaths throughout England and Wales last winter exceeded 50,000. As we have already heard, that is the highest recorded number for more than 40 years. The figures were described by the charity National Energy Action as “preventable and shameful”. According to that same group, at least 10,000 of those premature deaths were due to vulnerable people being unable to heat their homes adequately. I would like Members to reflect on the people behind those numbers. It means somebody’s neighbour, somebody’s parent, and somebody’s child—10,000 people dying before their time just because they could not keep warm.

The terrible impact extends beyond preventable deaths. I have previously mentioned the impact on health. We know that children living in fuel poverty are twice as likely to suffer from respiratory problems, such as asthma and bronchitis, and that fuel poverty is associated with low weight gains in infants and higher levels of hospital admissions in the first three years of life. Adolescents living in cold homes are at five times the risk of having multiple mental health problems. On top of that, there are the negative effects on educational performance, emotional resilience and wellbeing. When combined with the fact that fuel poverty is not evenly distributed throughout the country, but concentrated in pockets of urban and rural poverty, we have the makings of what can only be described as a social crisis. In some parts of my constituency, fuel poverty affects one quarter of all households, and one in five of single-parent households. We know that it is a problem locally because, between April 2017 and March 2018, of those people who came to a citizens advice bureau in Salford and Eccles about energy issues, the most common was dealing with fuel debt repayments.

In last year’s debate, I stated that 22% of households in Salford have prepayment meters compared with the national average of 15%, so I was particularly troubled by a report this year by Citizens Advice on the phenomenon of self-disconnection by those using prepayment meters. The report found that around 140,000 households in Great Britain could not afford to top up their meter in the past 12 months and that 88% of those households contained a child or someone with a long-term health issue. Half of those surveyed said that keeping their meter topped up was a daily concern, which is particularly shocking when we consider that more than 4 million households currently use prepayment meters.

Fuel poverty is not just an issue for those on prepayment meters. Following an unprecedented number of energy price hikes by suppliers rushing to increase prices in advance of the price cap, about which I will say more later, household energy debt has surged over the past year by 24%. It is often said that fuel poverty is due to the confluence of three factors that we have heard about very briefly already: low income, high fuel prices, and poor energy efficiency. I wish to say a few words about each.

After a decade of austerity and lost growth, annual wages are still £760 lower than they were in 2008. Is it any surprise therefore that 47% of all fuel-poor households in England are in full or part-time work? For those out of work, the benefits freeze has deepened fuel poverty as families, already struggling on very little, have experienced a real-terms income cut. The industry body, the Energy and Utilities Alliance, has noted that the introduction of universal credit, which leaves households without an income during the five-week changeover, is pushing more people towards making the decision not to heat their home and face the dilemma of heating or eating. Raising the national minimum wage to £10 an hour, ending the welfare freeze, and reversing cuts to people with disabilities would go a long way to tackling absolute poverty, which is at the root of so much fuel poverty.

On the cost of energy, last month Ofgem finally confirmed that an energy price cap will come into force in January 2019. That is almost two years after the Prime Minister first announced a price cap as Conservative policy, and it is set at a level that is hundreds of pounds higher than the cheapest tariffs available. In the intervening period, the big six energy suppliers have hiked their tariffs, some on multiple occasions. Ofgem has announced that the cap is likely to be revised upwards within months of being introduced.

In addition, wholesale prices are rising. I feel obliged to mention research published just yesterday by the UK Energy Research Centre, which finds that a no-deal or hard Brexit could increase electricity generation costs by £270 million a year. That is another reason, if we needed one, to redouble our efforts in this House to avoid no deal or a bad Brexit deal.

Labour’s 2017 manifesto pledged an immediate emergency price cap to ensure that the average dual fuel household energy bill remained below £1,000 per year. Had that cap been introduced in July 2017, it would have saved households £2.85 billion between July 2017 and November 2018.

James Heappey: I know the hon. Lady does a lot of reading into energy policy, so she will know that a price cap can only be a temporary correction to the market. What is her longer-term plan for delivering a fairer energy price?

Rebecca Long Bailey: The hon. Gentleman is very learned on the topic of fuel poverty, and I agree with what he said. The Labour party has persistently stated that an energy price cap is a sticking plaster while the wider energy market is reformed, because it is not currently working in the interest of consumers. It forms part of the wider plan of Labour’s energy policy portfolio completely to reform the energy system as we know it.

Network costs represent over one quarter of the cost of a gas and electricity bill, but customers have been getting a bad deal. Citizens Advice estimates that network companies will make £7.5 billion in unjustified profits over an eight-year period. A recent report by the Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit found even more excessive...
returns captured by distribution network operators than Citizens Advice had predicted, with the six distribution network operator parent companies posting an average profit margin of 30.4%. By bringing energy networks back into public ownership, Labour would reinvest and pass on to customers the money currently paid out in dividends.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Rebecca Long Bailey**: I will make some progress before taking an intervention from the hon. Gentleman.

I turn to energy efficiency. A well-insulated home saves households money, makes homes naturally warmer and more pleasant places to live, and cuts energy use, helping to tackle climate change. At least £1 for every £4 spent heating UK homes is wasted due to poor insulation. Improving the energy efficiency of the UK’s housing stock, which is among the oldest and least efficient in Europe, really should be a no-brainer, so how are we currently faring?

According to the Committee on Climate Change, insulation rates have fallen by 90% since 2012. The energy company obligation—known as ECO—which is funded by a levy on bills, is the only remaining domestic energy efficiency delivery mechanism in England. It has also been cut from £1.2 billion a year when it was first introduced in 2013 to £720 million per annum in its second phase, and has been reduced still further to £640 million—effectively a 50% cut. It is therefore no surprise that the Government are off track to meet their targets.

In their 2015 fuel poverty strategy, the Government set a target of ensuring that fuel-poor homes are upgraded to an energy efficiency rating of EPC band C by 2030. But according to the Institute for Public Policy Research think-tank, the Government will not meet their target for upgrading fuel-poor homes until at least 2091. That is why, as a policy suggestion to the Minister, the Labour party proposed investing £2.3 billion a year to provide financial support for households to insulate their homes, and for local authorities to drive take-up and delivery of insulation schemes, in order to bring 4 million homes up to EPC band C by the end of one parliamentary term.

Labour’s plans included fully covering the cost of insulation for low-income homeowners and all social housing, which will particularly benefit older people living in fuel poverty and pensioners on low income struggling to cover the cost of sky-rocketing energy bills. This would have delivered savings of at least £270 a year to affected households. As well as this investment, Labour was also committed to tightening the regulation of privately rented homes, blocking poorly insulated homes from being rented out.

I have tried to set out just some of the measures that will tackle the causes of fuel poverty: low incomes, high fuel costs and poor energy efficiency. I am not seeking to make party political points, but rather to indicate the level of commitment needed if we are truly to address the problem, because what is the alternative? Are we really willing to accept preventable and shameful winter mortality at current levels? Are we really willing to accept that we live in a country where some people go to bed early to stay warm, leave the curtains drawn and even paper over their windows? Is it acceptable that people, often vulnerable people, have to seek out a library, a café or even an A&E department just to stay warm?

I do not believe that anybody in this House wants to see that, but wanting to end fuel poverty is simply not enough; rather, we must be willing to deploy the resources available to us to bring an end to what remains an avoidable indignity for millions.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Madam Deputy Speaker** (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am afraid that I was over-optimistic about the five minutes. We will need to have a time limit, and it has to be three minutes.

6.30 pm

**James Heappey** (Welsh) (Con): I will rattle through what I have to say very quickly, then, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As both Front Benchers have said, the key to solving fuel poverty is twofold: on the one hand, we reduce the price of energy; and on the other, we help consumers to use less energy. In the two minutes and 30 seconds remaining, I will very quickly whizz through some of the things that we could do that are relatively low-hanging fruit for the Government. First, the costs of running the energy system are growing too much, and we have a number of very comfortable, monopolistic companies that perhaps we could screw down on a little in order to see whether the growth in system costs could be curbed.

Secondly, while the price cap is a useful temporary measure, there is a huge opportunity for market reform in order to take advantage of the very cheap renewable energy that can now be generated, and the flexibility that now exists within the system that can make use of those renewables without the need for quite so much in the way of back-up generation.

We can also make some really good progress on allowing energy and heat as a service to come through as a proposition to consumers. I would like Ofgem to do more to work with the companies that are likely to provide those services so that we can put in place a regulatory construct that will allow consumers to start to take advantage of this sort of initiative very quickly. I know that the Government are leading on the changes to the feed-in tariff, but we must start to look at how we encourage people to generate behind the meter for their consumption behind the meter, because that will reduce their energy costs, too.

But generation is just half of the story—using less is very important, too. Many of the measures I have mentioned, particularly things like heat and energy as a service, will naturally lend themselves to greater energy efficiency, particularly as the companies that are delivering those services are quite likely to want to install the energy efficiency measures within a home or business because they make a greater margin by being able to do that in the most efficient way possible. Lots of companies out there are innovating all the time in terms of what can be put in walls, rooms, doors, windows and floors in order to let less heat escape from a business or a home.

**Dr Drew** (Wells) (Con): I will rattle through what
James Heappey: Not only do I have lots of them in my constituency—I have just bought one and am in the process of renovating it. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In rural areas, the deadly combination of solid walls and not being on the gas grid can often mean that fuel poverty is at its most acute in areas that look relatively affluent. Tackling that can and should be a priority, but it is monstrously expensive. When someone is going through the process of renovating a home, they are making lots of decisions, and the energy efficiency measures are by far the least glamorous of those that they choose when the alternatives are things like decorating, carpets and all the other stuff.

Those who live in fuel poverty are having to make choices that we really should not be asking them to make when the technology exists out there for us to help them to use less energy through what we put in their walls, roofs and floors, but also through the tech that we put in their homes that can help them to manage their demand in a really helpful way. I know that the Minister is very focused on this and that the Housing and Planning Minister also recognises the enormous value in setting higher standards so that those who live in social housing have better energy efficiency.

6.34 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I will rush through my notes because other Members want to speak, but we need more time for this kind of debate in the House, not the curtailed version we have tonight.

Far too many people are suffering cold and damp, in fuel poverty, and they should not be doing so. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) pointed out, two of the most important drivers for fixing fuel poverty are reserved to this place: low incomes and fuel prices. Austerity has been one of the key drivers of fuel poverty for people across the nations of the UK. The UN special rapporteur has been mentioned tonight, so I will not cover that ground again, but he said that the “manifestations are clear for all to see.”

Westminster austerity increases winter austerity for people.

Patricia Gibson: What my hon. Friend is saying is very important. I grew up in a household where the heating was never put on, and I remember trying to do schoolwork with my freezing hands trying to hold a pen. He has talked about the factors that drive fuel poverty. Does he agree that the high cost of nuclear will do nothing but exacerbate the high cost of energy, with the extortionate price rates involved hitting poorer families hard?

Drew Hendry: Indeed. I can only agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come back to that.

The key thing is that universal credit is driving the problems that people face in their houses. They have a genuine problem and have to endure pain in choosing whether to eat or put on the heating. That is not a cliché. It is a fact of life for people living in fuel poverty. Over the past five years and more, we have seen it in my constituency, with people suffering from the pilot of universal credit to its roll-out today.

The worst fuel poverty comes in areas of low income and, typically, rural areas. Unemployment levels are almost irrelevant when it comes to universal credit. The measures that the Chancellor introduced in his Budget do nothing for those already struggling on universal credit. They do nothing to reverse the cuts and nothing for those who are caught by the odious rape clause. Indeed, they do nothing to address the benefits freeze—even the transition funding will not come into place until next year. The Resolution Foundation has pointed out that the benefits freeze will cost low-income families £210 in 2019-20. Those are poor people, women, ethnic minorities, children, single parents and those with disabilities.

Measures can be introduced to reduce fuel poverty—for example, on insulation. The UK Government cut grants in 2015, and as a result, new insulation dropped by 90%. The new ECO programme is cautiously welcomed, but as green think-tank E3G pointed out, “At least twice as much support is needed for low income households who struggle with their energy bills.”

It went on to say that the Government of Scotland grasped the importance of energy efficiency and that, including ECO support, they “invest four times and twice as much per capita respectively in low income household energy efficiency as is invested in England.”

Low-income households need energy efficiency, and they need that to be invested in.

The Scottish Government’s green homes network has helped thousands of people to stay warm and save energy. It is clear to everyone except the UK Government that new industries such as carbon capture and storage and hydrogen need to be invested in. After the betrayal of Peterhead, with that £1 billion project withdrawn, it will not cut it for the UK Government to replace that with 10% of the investment promised. These new technologies need proper investment.

The Energy Saving Trust said that Scotland is not only “leading the way” in energy efficiency but “regularly outperforms the rest of the UK when it comes to slashing carbon emissions.”

On public and community ownership, Local Energy Scotland, the Scottish Government’s arm, is going forward with local energy projects and community and renewable schemes through the community and renewable energy scheme—CARES. However, Ofgem’s consultation seems targeted to hit homes and businesses that generate their own electricity. The aim, it says, is to shift the burden to others; those who use more will pay less, and those who use less will pay more. That disproportionately hits those in areas of high fuel poverty.

We need fair pricing. People who are living off the grid need to be treated fairly. We need an off-grid regulator, and we need to bring forward payments for off-grid people. In 2012, my former colleague Mike Weir MP introduced a private Member’s Bill, the Winter Fuel Allowance Payments (Off-Gas Grid Claimants) Bill, to help bring forward the timing of winter fuel payments to enable people to purchase fuel at a time of year when prices were likely to be lower. Yet this is not regulated.

Ofgem seems more interested in protecting the energy companies. It has also refused to do anything about the differential that households, particularly those in Highland and other rural areas, pay in energy unit prices. In Highland, it costs 4p a unit more for people to pay for their energy than in other parts of the UK. An Ofgem spokesman recently said to The Press and Journal:
“Network companies face different costs for serving customers in GB regions, for both gas and electricity. Licensed network operators recover their allowed revenues, set by Ofgem under the RIO, or “price control arrangements, from customers located within their licensed areas... This is a reasonable way to allocate these costs between customers. Ultimately it would be for Government to decide if changes should be made to these existing arrangements. Typical network costs are around 25 per cent (about £250) of overall energy bills.”

Ofgem is more interested in looking after the energy companies than those consumers who are actually struggling. We need a fair redistribution of these costs, which does not mean costs rising for other people, but actually brings down the level for those who are suffering in rural areas. There is poor value and there are poor services.

In Scotland, despite benefiting from its energy wealth, Westminster has left an energy system in which consumers are struggling to pay their bills. Despite the huge renewable resources—25% of Europe’s offshore wind—and oil and gas tax revenues of £350 billion since the 1970s, investment has been in failing and failed public power. Wylfa, for example, is rumoured to be benefiting from £6 billion in equity and £9 billion in debt funding from this Government. It has a strike price deal that, at £77.50, is way above a fair rate—it is, indeed, below Hinkley’s eye-watering £92.50, but way above offshore wind’s £57.50—and who pays? The consumer—those in fuel poverty.

The Scottish Government are bringing forward their publicly owned energy company, and we look forward to seeing the benefits of that. I will wind up soon, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you must understand that there is a lot of ground to cover in this debate, and we have been given very little time for everybody to do so.

We look forward to bringing forward a publicly owned energy company to reduce bills for people in Scotland and to help them out of the poverty trap of fuel poverty, low wages and the crippling application of universal credit and austerity to people in their homes and across our communities. It is time that the UK Government took some responsibility for this and took action to alleviate the pain that people suffer on fuel poverty.

6.42 pm

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I cannot thank the hon. Gentleman who has just spoken by mentioning his constituency because that would use up all of my time.

There are two things that I think are important for the people of Willenhall and Bloxwich who may be suffering from fuel poverty. The first is that, even if they have to insulate their lofts themselves, the cost of that for a three-bedroom property is approximately £300, and Which? estimates that the payback would be in two years. That is a saving of £225 per year on their fuel bills, so it is definitely worth the investment. The second is that people do not switch energy provider. To me, it is heartbreaking that 60% of people surveyed a year ago had not switched their energy provider. Doing so could afford them a great opportunity to save money. I would like to say to the people of my constituency, “Please get your loft insulated, and please make sure that you are getting the best deal from your energy provider.”

I would like to talk briefly about my time with the YMCA. When I started working at the YMCA, it had a 72-bed direct access hostel for people who had previously been rough sleepers. It was a revelation to go to that building, which was 60 years old. Originally, it served as a home for men who had come to work in Birmingham and needed somewhere to live. As I have said, it was then used to provide accommodation for former rough sleepers.

The YMCA did not have much cash, so when I got there it still had the original Robin Hood Beeston boiler. The boiler was over 50 years old; it had originally started life as a coal-powered boiler before being converted to run on oil and subsequently on gas. It was probably the most inefficient heating system in the UK, heating a 72-bed hostel, with very poor control—absolutely crazy. I would frequently get there during the summer to find the heating on and the building so hot that the windows were open, because it did not have a sophisticated system.

However, along came Homes England with a grant of £2.6 million. The YMCA was able to raise £700,000 itself and has now introduced a much more efficient heating system. The building has been completely clad to improve the U-values and has had new windows fitted. As a result, the cost of heating the building has dropped dramatically, and when we are talking about people with very low funds contributing through a service charge to heat the building, that is an essential improvement. That is what this Government have done to help.

6.45 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): If ever we needed an example of how the Brexit omnishambles is squeezing out time for important debates on issues that matter to our constituents, this is a perfect case in point. There is so much to say. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on fuel poverty and energy efficiency, I wish we had more time.

For example, a report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research in June showed that the Government are set to miss their fuel poverty targets by 60 years. It is not that the Government do not know how to reverse the situation—indeed, they have even set a goal to do so, in both their manifesto and their recent clean growth strategy. The tragedy is that in recent years the Government have scrapped, reversed or shelved many of the measures that could actually have helped. It is truly shocking that, for example, we are in the absurd situation where the UK Government are not investing any public funds in improving domestic energy efficiency through insulation, particularly in England. In 2018, in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, that is nothing short of a moral failure.

The frustration is that many of us know that tackling fuel poverty by investing in energy efficiency could be a real win-win, bringing people’s fuel bills down, tackling climate change and creating jobs. Despite clear evidence of that win-win-win, the funding for energy efficiency in this year’s Budget was zilch. Quite why the Government can find £30 billion to fix potholes and improve roads but not to keep people warm is beyond me.

Many of us had hoped that the Government would use their response to the national infrastructure assessment to make progress on this issue. They did not. Published
quietly alongside this year’s Budget, it did not even make reference to the Government’s statutory fuel poverty targets, let alone commit to the additional investment needed to meet them. The impact of the Government’s complacency will be felt long beyond the effects of fuel poverty today. As we know, a few months ago the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its latest report, saying that we have just 12 years to halve global emissions if there is to be any chance of meeting the 1.5°C threshold.

The Committee on Climate Change has repeatedly made it clear that improving energy efficiency through better insulating our homes is crucial to our existing climate targets. We need those policies now, well before the long-term targets of the Climate Change Act 2008 are amended in line with the latest IPCC report and the Paris climate agreement. The withdrawal of incentives has cut home insulation installations to 5% of 2012 levels. That is a shameful failure, and it has to change. We need a massive programme of home insulation if we are to make a meaningful contribution to the global project of protecting our planet and our children’s future. We also need to have not just the big six energy companies, which are profiting from this situation; we should have 60,000 energy companies and more, as they do in Germany. We should have real community energy, not as a “nice to have” but as a genuine, essential measure.

6.49 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): A few weeks ago I had the privilege of chairing a roundtable organised by the all-party parliamentary carbon monoxide group. The roundtable looked at the link between fuel poverty and carbon monoxide poisoning—perhaps not the most obvious link, but one that the various stakeholders around the table, from National Energy Action to the London fire brigade, identified as a real concern, partly because people were bringing in barbecues as secondary heating. We may have heard about that problem with barbecues, but we do not realise that people are relying on them for heating. We also heard about the use of secondary heating options in homes, such as gas fires that are often unserviced. Last year, only 40% of gas fires were reported by households as having been serviced over the previous 12 years, with a key reason being cost. Sadly, too few people are aware of the gas priority services register. I intend to make people in my constituency more aware of it, as well as the warm home discount scheme.

We have to question how we can have got to that position. The fact is that many people in my constituency are suffering because they do not have enough money. Some are on universal credit. They have disabilities, and their benefits have changed. They have choices to make about whether they heat their home or buy food. Some of our local food banks report that people are asking for food that does not have to be heated but can be eaten straight from the can or the packet, because they cannot afford to cook. In an area like mine, where many people suffer from lung conditions, people should not have to choose between heating and eating—it’s not on.

Energy costs are currently very high. The default tariff cap might be useful, but it still does not resolve the issue of people not having the facilities or the skill to work their way around the energy supply market for the cheapest deal. According to the Committee on Climate Change, progress on energy consumption has stalled. As we have heard, insulation rates have fallen since 2012. Current resources are not sufficient to meet fuel poverty commitments or wider energy efficiency targets set out in the clean growth strategy.

As other hon. Members including the Minister have said, winter deaths exceeded 50,000 last year, many of which were due to fuel poverty. Areas like mine in the north-east have been the hardest hit and have the highest percentage of households in fuel poverty in the country. The spikes in winter deaths due to fuel poverty are both preventable and shameful. The responsibility lies with the Government. They must address fuel poverty and energy efficiency in the comprehensive spending review.

6.52 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is damning for all of us in this House that the Benches are empty as we debate one of the greatest scandals of our time, fuel poverty.

I first spoke about fuel poverty in January 2011. It was my very first speech in Westminster Hall. That day, I chided the Government for 25,995 winter deaths. Within eight years, that has nearly doubled to 50,100. I know that Ministers like to blame the previous Labour Government, but there is nothing they can say about that—it is on their watch. They are the ones responsible for excess winter deaths and they have a duty to do something about it.

The second time I spoke about fuel poverty was in relation to terminal illnesses. In my constituency, like in many former industrial heartlands, we see large numbers of people with chest and respiratory diseases—chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and so on—which mean that they have to turn up their thermostat because they feel the cold more than anybody else. Further to that, I was shocked to discover that many people who have been diagnosed with cancer or other terminal illnesses, such as motor neurone disease, find themselves in abject poverty. Not only can they not afford to pay their food bills, they are struggling to pay their energy bills.

In that second debate, I specifically asked the Government to consider giving people with terminal illnesses an entitlement to a winter fuel payment during the time they are ill, or even, in the case of motor neurone disease, to the end of their life. The Minister at the time said he would look into that. Unfortunately, here we are seven years later and cancer patients and those with terminal illnesses are still suffering. For them and their families I call on the Government today to make it a priority to give people with terminal illnesses some comfort in their final harsh days.

6.54 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): A quarter of Scottish households are living in fuel poverty. It is clear that that is down to low income and the high cost of fuel. Alongside that, the high cost of nuclear, with the extortionate strike prices involved, is grotesque. Scotland boasts huge renewable resources, including 25% of Europe’s offshore wind resources.

I grew up in a freezing cold household, and I remember, when I was doing my school work, trying to hold a pen with freezing cold hands. The Minister will appreciate
that in this day and age, no child and no family should have to live like that. It is time that fuel poverty was tackled in a meaningful way, so that people can enjoy a minimum level of comfort in their homes. That is why what the Scottish Government are doing on defining fuel poverty—we are one of the first European countries to do so—is so important. They have set a target to cut fuel poverty to 5% by 2040. The UK Government must use their powers to do what they can to deal with this fundamental social blight that looms over too many households in the cold, dark months.

6.55 pm

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): In a speech on the same topic early in 2017, I said: “We are in a cold homes crisis.”—[Official Report, 21 March 2017; Vol. 623, c. 822.] Regrettably, that message remains. A large number of people in our society are living in fuel poverty, unable to live in a warm, dry home, tragically often resulting in excess winter deaths. Living in fuel poverty is miserable, for both the young and old. It increases anxieties and stresses and puts pressure on the already stretched NHS. According to the NHS, the current scale of the problems in England alone costs the health service approximately £3.6 million a day and results in 50,000 unnecessary deaths. The Government have a duty to ensure that everybody in the UK is living in a warm, dry home, and I am grateful for this opportunity to hold them to account on the progress—or lack of it—on tackling fuel poverty.

A year since the last debate, little progress has been made and the Government continue to miss the targets that they set. How did we get to the tragic point where, weeks before Christmas, millions of people will be vulnerable to having a cold, damp home? Under the Tories, we have seen a low-wage, low-productivity economy, with precarious working hours for millions of people, leaving them vulnerable. Coupled with that, we have seen a disastrous universal credit roll-out, forcing millions into food banks. Shamelessly, Tory Ministers have used opening a food bank as a photo opportunity recently, as an example. We are in a cold homes crisis.

In my constituency, 41% of children are living in poverty, and the number of food bank parcels given out has increased exponentially. While many cannot rely on a decent pay packet, they are none the less meeting their living costs. Under a Labour Government in 2007, we saw 2.5 million energy efficiency measures taken personal responsibility for reforming the energy company obligation, which was only 30% focused on fuel poverty just a few years ago and is now 100% focused on fuel poverty. That means £6 billion of spending over the next decade. It is being focused on rural poverty and is more focused on those who actually need it. We have included disability benefits and allowed for more innovation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) said, solid wall insulation is not the way to improve fuel efficiency in many homes. With cross-party support, we introduced the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Act 2018 to save millions of people money on their energy bills. Of course there is more to do, but I hope that one day we can reach a cross-party consensus, on something as important as solving fuel poverty, on which no Government, including the last Labour Government, have a good track record.

We have halved the number of fuel-poor households living in F and G-rated properties since 2010. I have taken personal responsibility for reforming the energy company obligation, which was only 30% focused on fuel poverty over the last four years and is now 100% focused on fuel poverty. That means £6 billion of spending over the next decade. It is being focused on rural poverty and is more focused on those who actually need it. We have included disability benefits and allowed for more innovation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) said, solid wall insulation is not the way to improve fuel efficiency in many homes. With cross-party support, we introduced the Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Act 2018 to save millions of people money on their energy bills. Of course there is more to do, but I hope that one day we can reach a cross-party consensus, on something as important as solving fuel poverty, on which no Government, including the last Labour Government, have a good track record.

7 pm

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

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (COMPETITION)

That the draft Competition (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 October, be approved.—[Amanda Milling.]

Question agreed to.

VALUE ADDED TAX

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

That the Value Added Tax (Place of Supply of Services) (Supplies of Electronic Telecommunication and Broadcasting Services) Order 2018 (S.I. 2018, No. 1194), which was laid before this House on 19 November, be approved.—(Amanda Milling.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Green Deal scheme

7 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents about the green deal scheme. Several of my constituents have lost out through the mis-selling of solar panels by
The petition states:

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the Government backed Green Deal Scheme has affected petitioners as we have suffered a detriment both to our finances, our private and family lives; further that many vulnerable residents have invested their life savings in good faith, and others have accrued up to £17,000 in debt to pay for the work that was carried out; and further that in many cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result we are unable to sell our properties or have the assurance that they are safe to live in, or can be insured.

The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to ensure that the Government will compensate and protect people who have found themselves suffering a detriment because of the Government backed scheme, and take steps to ensure that this cannot happen in the future.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[Private Parking: Ports and Trading Estates]

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

7.2 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I sought this evening’s debate to raise awareness of the unethical practice of commercial car parking firms issuing unreasonable parking and trespass enforcement notices against haulage companies in my constituency and elsewhere. I also wish to seek assistance from the Government to ensure that a proper framework is in place to properly address the unacceptable behaviour of commercial car parking enforcement companies, which are damaging the British haulage industry and threatening its profitability and jobs in Suffolk and, increasingly, elsewhere in the UK.

This issue first came to my attention when Magnus Group, a haulier based in Great Blakenham in my constituency, invited me to visit and asked for my support. Magnus Group is supported by in excess of 30 other UK road hauliers that collectively have the backing of the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association. I am grateful to Magnus Group and Bartrums, another haulage company in my constituency, based in Eye, as well as Anchor Storage Solutions in Kenton and the Road Haulage Association for helping me to prepare for this debate.

I will begin with a little background for the Minister. The examples I will raise are particularly pertinent to Suffolk, and although I am raising concerns on behalf of road hauliers, my constituency being landlocked, I will give examples from the UK’s container port in Felixstowe. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) shares my concerns, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

Felixstowe port receives in excess of 45%—close to 50%—of the UK’s container traffic, so the issues I am raising affect haulage companies not just in Suffolk but throughout the UK. Given the importance that the Government are placing on supporting UK trade as we go through the Brexit process, unethical practices that are affecting the UK haulage industry and its competitiveness must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Trinity Distribution Park in Felixstowe is owned and operated by Trinity College Cambridge and managed by Bidwells, an estate management company, which in turn employs the services of a commercial parking enforcement company called Proserve. Trinity owns much of the land around the port of Felixstowe. To date, it has failed to engage with the concerns of the road haulage industry. It is concerning that it appears to be allowing its agent, Bidwells, to employ an unregulated enforcement company which is using unreasonable practices to manage traffic on and around its property. Roads under the jurisdiction of Proserve at Trinity Distribution Park include Dooley Road, off the A154 at Walton Avenue, the BP garage on the A154 at Trinity Avenue, Blofield Road, Parker Avenue and Fagbury Road.

While the hauliers recognise the need for reasonable enforcement, they object to the unreasonable actions of Proserve, backed by Bidwells. Enforcement, when required, must be conducted in a fair, transparent and reasonable manner. Proserve’s actions include levying unreasonable charges and fines on hauliers—£180, rising to £250 if...
not paid within 14 days; failing to sign up to a regulated appeals procedure to monitor the appropriateness of the fines and trespass notices that it hands out; applying additional charges if and when fines and trespass notices are challenged—£37.50 per challenge; rejecting, without due process or consideration, many of the challenges to the fines and trespass notices that it hands out to hauliers; blocking in lorries and other vehicles owned by road hauliers, and using the process to issue trespass notices for each hour during which the vehicles are blocked in; and issuing trespass notices for vehicles that have stopped for only one minute, for example when conducting a parking manoeuvre such as a three-point turn.

There are a number of concerns about the legitimacy of the trespass notices themselves. For instance, Proserve has no access to the DVLA database, and notices are therefore issued to businesses on the basis of the livery of the vehicles concerned. Incorrect or no registration numbers are supplied to the hauliers on the notices. Notices and fines are sent to the wrong addresses, thus delaying their receipt by the intended recipients, who incur additional penalty charges as a consequence. There are substantial gaps between the dates recorded on notices and the dates on which they are received by haulage companies, and those delays also lead to additional penalty charges. Proserve claims on its notices that it uses the DVLA to help it to enforce trespass notices.

The DVLA categorically denies that, and has advised the haulage companies affected to take the matter up directly with Suffolk Trading Standards.

There are also disturbing stories from a number of haulage companies which tell me that Proserve has told them that it will “go easy on them” if they pay it an annual fee. In effect, Proserve is asking hauliers to bribe it to stop handing out unethical fines. Companies that do not pay the fee find themselves receiving more attention from Proserve, which then increases the number of fines and trespass notices. Proserve seems to be operating what is, in effect, a mafia-style protection racket which penalises hauliers who refuse to comply. Bidwells, the managing agent, appears to stand by Proserve’s enforcement notices and practices, and Trinity College does not even know what is happening. It has refused to engage with hauliers who have raised concerns with it.

As I am sure the Minister will know, this practice is extremely damaging to road hauliers and their businesses when they attempt to deliver to and collect from businesses trading from Trinity Distribution Park. Many have either ceased to trade with businesses located there, or are becoming reluctant to do so because of the risk of trespass notices and fines. Felixstowe is the UK’s biggest container port, but the unethical behaviour of a parking enforcement agency is now preventing businesses from operating correctly in the port, and hauliers are finding it difficult to carry out day-to-day operations. The high risk of trespass notices means that the hauliers face having to increase their costs to their customers, pricing them out of the market and preventing them from competing fairly. The knock-on effect to business is that companies’ operations are becoming less efficient and less profitable, and there is an increased threat to local and national haulage and storage jobs.

I have also been provided with legal advice from a company in my constituency, Hemisphere Freight Ltd, which has been affected by the actions of Proserve. The advice is as follows:

“The landowner could be in breach of lease if it has authorised or permitted Proserve to cause obstruction and harassment on the estate roads.

The sub-lease provided does not support the assertion made by Proserve that there is a clause in all the leases to stop vehicles standing or permitting others to stand on any of the private estate roads. In the sub-lease provided, there is not an express clause that prohibits vehicles from queuing.

There is no contractual agreement between vehicle operators and the landowner.

The vehicle operators access the estate roads as licensees of the leaseholders of the premises visited. It is not clear that queuing on the estate roads is a trespass. The fines levied for alleged trespass are not enforceable.”

Because there is no clear legal framework or requirement for Proserve to be part of a trade body, its actions might be illegal but it can still operate in the unethical way it chooses to, and it continues to punish road haulier companies with impunity.

It is also worth reflecting on the direct experience of three companies that are being badly affected by the actions of Proserve and the inertia of both Bidwells and Trinity College Cambridge in tackling its unethical behaviour.

Magnus Group is based in Great Blakenham near Ipswich. Kevin Parker, managing director of the Magnus Group, tells me that it was formed in 1973, has gradually grown and now employs over 140 staff, but he is concerned that the damage being done to the company by the actions of Proserve might pose a serious threat to jobs in the future. Over the past six years, Magnus Group has paid in excess of £7,000 in fines issued by Proserve for both Ransomes industrial park in Ipswich and Trinity Distribution Park in Felixstowe. However, Proserve’s actions have escalated in recent weeks and months in Felixstowe.

Magnus Group has now opted to stop paying these fines after receiving a trespass notice with an unknown registration number on it. When it queried this with Bidwells, the land agent, Magnus was told it was not to be questioned, and that the fine was based on the vehicle’s livery. Magnus Group has also received a fine for a vehicle that has never been registered to the company. The advice from Bidwells was that the fine was to be paid as it carried the livery of one of Magnus Group’s customers, Specialized bikes. One such trespass notice, or letter, from Proserve advised that Magnus Group is being challenged—which has thus far been ignored. Proserve’s trespass notice states that Magnus Group has 10 days from service of the notice to pay the full amount. If it does not, legal proceedings will commence in the county court. Magnus Group currently has 18 different letters for different vehicles entering the land in Felixstowe since 19 September, each notice containing a charge of £250 per incident.

The photographic evidence is not clear as to where the vehicles have been photographed. Indeed, many of them appear to be_simply_vehicles travelling on a tarmac road. Magnus Group has, at present, a number of fines totalling almost £6,000. Some of its vehicle fines have accrued further charges—some totalled £337.50 per fine
and one is for £421.50. Magnus Group vehicles have been forcibly blocked by Proserve; while blocked, Proserve has taken photographs of the vehicle and used the photographs to subsequently issue fines. I am sure the Minister agrees that that is far from ethical practice and is certainly not desirable in the UK’s leading container port.

**Peter Aldous** (Waveney) (Con): I am listening with interest to my hon. Friend’s speech. I know these roads and estates as I used to be a surveyor practising in that area, and the roads are not in the best order. Does my hon. Friend agree that this sort of practice, and the poor estate management in not keeping these roads up to standard, is undermining Felixstowe’s position as a premier container port in the UK?

**Dr Poulter:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. I shall give the House one more example on exactly that point. The issue for the Government to consider is that the actions of Proserve and companies like it are not isolated to Felixstowe. This is occurring throughout the United Kingdom. Specifically in Felixstowe, however, we know that jobs are reliant not only on the port and that many other jobs in Suffolk are linked through the haulage industry. As we look towards Brexit, the position of Felixstowe as the UK’s premier container port and the importance of Britain’s trade and its exporting and importing capacity is something that the Government should take into account. The behaviour of Proserve is undermining the competitiveness of Felixstowe, and it is potentially putting jobs at risk in Suffolk and elsewhere in the UK that are linked to the port. This is something that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate. He is right to say that these things are happening not only in Felixstowe; they are happening elsewhere as well, and clearly no one is safe. Does he agree that excessive private parking enforcement carried out with no sensitivity can cause great distress in what can already be distressing circumstances? One of my constituents was hounded by a private parking company for a fine that was incurred when she was parked at a commercial harbour in Northern Ireland. She had had a heart attack and was taken away by ambulance, so she could not move her car. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that example and others like it show why people and companies get annoyed and angry? These private parking enforcement companies should not be a law unto themselves. They need to be brought under the control of legislation and the rule of law.

**Dr Poulter:** I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. We know from the behaviour of Proserve and from the example that he has just raised that these companies are often operating without any legal framework, and that there is no proper appeals process available to the victims of those companies. I have been talking about the commercial environment, but I believe that he was talking more from a private citizen’s perspective. However, the examples are certainly comparable. This is borne out even further by my next example.

Bartrums is a large haulage company in Eye, in the north of Suffolk. Andrew Watton, its chief executive officer, has told me:

“For a number of years, Bartrums haulage have been dogged by over-zealous parking enforcement to the point of almost extortion”— by Proserve in Felixstowe.

“This enforcement company is not part of any parking enforcement association and therefore has no appeals process to the fines for which they impose. The fines and charges are excessive and when you complain or challenge the penalty via Bidwell’s”— the managing agents—

“you are then charged an additional management fee. Hauliers who fail to make payment of the fine imposed are then banned from site (an area which makes up a substantial proportion of Felixstowe Port). The fines are imposed for stopping anywhere on the carriageway across the controlled area. The fines are in the region of £250...This is under the offence of trespass. Many hauliers across the UK are victim to this sharp practice and growing in number. We have now got to the point of taking group action against Trinity College directly, as previous legal actions against Proserve have failed. This is a restrictive practice, and some select local hauliers in the local area are exempt from these fines, which is anti-competitive.”

As I mentioned earlier, companies may be exempted from these fines because they pay Proserve a fee in order to be given better treatment. That does not sound like a fair or ethical way of running a parking enforcement company in a port the size of Felixstowe. It sounds like extortion, because if the hauliers do not pay, they get fined. I hope that the Minister will be able to look into this.

Andrew Watton continued:

“Trinity are obliged to look at mitigating these charges, which they have failed to do.”

Trinity College’s failure to engage with the process throughout has been woeful.

I want to give one last example. FTS Hatswell Ltd tells me:

“Proserve is a company who work on behalf of the landowners at Trinity Distribution Park...They are issuing trespass notices and heavy fines even if you stop to ask for directions. Last week I got a call from another Haulier whose driver stopped as he had hit something lying in the road.”

Yet he still got a fine and a trespass notice. The company continued:

“FTS Hatswell Limited are currently banned from both sites” that Proserve runs,

“and even the BP garage by the estate. They are not able to obtain owner details from the DVLA as they don’t belong to a parking enforcement body.”

The challenge for the Minister is to meet the three tests that I have set out. Clearly, a parking enforcement company is behaving unethically and affecting hauliers all over the UK. It affects the productivity and functioning of Felixstowe port, which is the biggest container port in the country. I know that the Government will want to address that, given the looming decisions on Brexit and the importance of overseas trade.

Setting aside the inertia and disappointing behaviour of Trinity College and its agents, Bidwells, there are many concerns that need to be addressed. First, the Government need to ensure that all commercial car parking companies are properly regulated and signed up to a trade body and an appeals regulator, who can consider their actions fairly and ensure fairness and transparency in the appeals process. Secondly, we need to ensure that Suffolk Trading Standards is supported to take appropriate action against Proserve, and Bidwells.
and Trinity College. Thirdly, we should investigate setting up a proper regulatory system for commercial parking enforcement to support the haulage industry and prevent the unethical and anti-competitive behaviour of companies such as Proserve.

I look forward to the Minister’s response and thank her for taking the time to listen to the points I have raised on behalf of the haulage industry in Suffolk and elsewhere.

7.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport
(Ms Nusrat Ghani): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) on securing this debate on private parking enforcement at commercial ports and trading estates. I am pleased to respond to a debate on a subject that is clearly important to my hon. Friend, his constituents and hauliers. Although there are no major commercial ports in North Ipswich and Central Suffolk, his constituency is close to that great hub of maritime activity and excellence on the Harwich Haven waterway.

That includes one of the country’s largest and most important ports at Felixstowe, as well as other significant commercial ports at Harwich International and the port of Ipswich. Together, those ports deal with some 11% of total freight tonnage handled by English ports—36 million tonnes in 2017. They have a significant impact on the local economy as a source of employment and business activity. I am sure that I do not have to convince my hon. Friend and other Members of the economic importance of our ports to our country. They make a massive contribution to our economy and, to put it simply, are the reason why we can thrive as a trading nation. Our ports are our main gateway to the world, handling 95% of all imports and exports, employing 24,000 people and boosting our economy by £5.4 billion a year.

As Minister for maritime, I see the story behind those statistics every day and the enterprise, investment, and commitment to customers that make Britain’s ports among the best in the world. I also had the opportunity in May to visit a number of our ports, including Felixstowe, and saw first hand the fundamental role they play.

The scale of the operations at Felixstowe is impressive. The port handles the largest container vessels in the world, some 400 metres long and holding some 18,000 twenty-foot equivalent unit—or TEU—containers, with 33 cranes to load and unload them. Felixstowe handles some 4 million TEU containers each year. Our other large container ports, including at London Gateway and Southampton, are just as impressive.

Our ports operate on a commercial basis in a competitive environment, including with ports on the continent. They have an impressive record of investment in new facilities, investing hundreds of millions of pounds in new facilities over the past 10 years, with further planned for the future. As my hon. Friend mentioned, their importance will grow as we leave the EU and start to make the most of the new global trading opportunities it brings.

As a consequence of their success, our major commercial ports generate significant volumes of road traffic moving freight to and from ports, with goods for export travelling to our ports and imported goods being taken to their destinations inland, such as warehouses, distribution centres and factories. Our ports are a key link in the supply chains of our economy. That is particularly the case at ports specialising in shipping containers, such as Felixstowe, London Gateway and Southampton, as well as larger roll-on roll-off ferry ports including Dover and Harwich International.

In most cases, the aim is for a vehicle to spend as little time as possible at the port, often arriving at a set time to pick up or deposit a container before departing shortly afterwards, or arriving at a port to catch a ferry service with as little time as possible spent at the port. The provision of parking for vehicles is not therefore that relevant to such ports. The priority is to ensure that traffic is kept moving smoothly through the port. However, some ports will provide more parking facilities, such as for use by departing cruise passengers. For other mainly smaller ports, car parking for tourists and other visitors can provide an important source of revenue, particularly over the summer season.

Each port is responsible for managing its own car parking arrangements. Some ports may use their statutory powers under harbour byelaws to do that, particularly where parking control is needed to ensure the safe and effective operation of the harbour. Others may use an approach involving private parking contractors.

Whatever the arrangements, they seem to work effectively. My Department receives very little correspondence from members of the public or businesses with concerns about parking arrangements at our ports, although that is not in any way to discount the concerns of my hon. Friend’s constituents.

Dr Poulter: I understand that the Minister is reading from a pre-prepared speech, but will she acknowledge that I represent the views of more than 30 haulage companies that have a problem with how commercial parking enforcement is being run at Felixstowe port by Proserve? It is damaging their competitiveness and it is potentially costing jobs. Proserve’s unethical behaviour needs to be addressed.

Ms Ghani: I was just about to come on to that. It is important that we understand any potential damage to our haulage industry, which is key to getting freight in and out of our country and to ensuring our ports thrive now and in the future.

If any individual or business has concerns about parking arrangements at ports, those concerns are always best addressed directly to the ports themselves—I understand that my hon. Friend is frustrated by the lack of interaction from the port and the operating company—and it is for the contractor to consider and quickly resolve those concerns.

My hon. Friend’s constituents have raised concerns about the way in which one particular private parking enforcement company has been operating at a distribution facility at Felixstowe. I understand that the facility is not part of the port itself but is close to it. He has written to the site’s owners raising his constituents’ concerns, to which I hope and expect he will get a satisfactory response. Although I would not wish to comment on the specifics of that particular case, improving the way the private parking sector works is an important issue for the Government.
The private parking industry is currently self-regulating. However, like my hon. Friend, we have concerns about the practices of some private parking companies. That is why the Government are pleased to support the Parking (Code of Practice) Bill, a private Member’s Bill tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight). The Bill passed its remaining stages in the House of Commons on 23 November, and it was introduced in the other place on 26 November.

The Bill seeks to create a single code of practice that is applicable to every private parking operator, rather than the current position in which each parking association has a different code of practice and different standards to which it holds its members. By providing a single code of practice, the Bill aims to create clarity and consistency across the industry for both parking operators and motorists. It also aims to raise standards by incorporating best practice as standard across the industry.

I welcome the amendment made on Report, which will allow a single appeals body to be appointed. That is key to some of the concerns raised by my hon. Friend, and it will create a straightforward process for motorists who have received a private parking ticket to follow to appeal.

My hon. Friend raised a number of concerns—one was about penalties. I will be taking that back to my Department so that the roads Minister, the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), ensures that my hon. Friend gets a robust response. Once again, my hon. Friend highlighted the importance of the logistics industry, and we cannot have it feeling that it is being particularly targeted because of the way it conducts business.

I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) has joined us in the Chamber. She is already across these issues, and I will make sure that my Department is working closely with hers to ensure that both hauliers and local constituency Members of Parliament are represented appropriately. I hope that my response has assured my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich that the Government are well aware of the issue of parking at commercial ports and trading estates, both in my Department and in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is also involved in enforcement. I will make sure that the record of today’s debate is passed to the appropriate Minister so that they can respond to my hon. Friend, too. We must not forget that the parking code of practice, when it becomes law, should help to address a number of the concerns the Government have about how the current systems works. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue this evening, but I am sure that his constituents will welcome the proposed Bill. I will ensure that the appropriate Ministers respond further on the issues relating to penalties that he raised.

Question put and agreed to.

7.31 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 12 December 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

British Service Personnel Memorial

1. John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): If the Government will make it its policy to build a national memorial to British service personnel killed on service in Northern Ireland, [908071]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): May I start by paying tribute to my predecessor in this role, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), who has been typically generous and helpful with his time and efforts during the handover?

I am sure that everyone on both sides of the House will agree that we all owe a vast debt of gratitude to the heroism and bravery of British servicemen and women who were killed upholding the rule of law in Northern Ireland. Their sacrifice will never be forgotten. Within the National Memorial Arboretum in Staffordshire sits a global audience. So far, I have visited CM Precision Components in Downpatrick, the Causeway Chamber of Commerce, Confederation of British Industry representatives of the Federation of Small Businesses, Queen’s University Centre of Excellence in Precision Medicine in Belfast and many Northern Ireland businesses throughout the world.

John Mann: Anthony Dykes, who came from Harworth, a mining village in my constituency, was murdered on 5 April 1979. His parents, Fred and Kathleen Dykes, are two of the finest people I have ever met and represent everything that is good about my community and this country. Other grieving parents have specific memorials. For Fred and Kathleen’s son and others who were killed or murdered on duty in Northern Ireland, there is no such memorial. Is it not now time that, as with other conflicts, there is a specific memorial for those who served our country and lost their lives in the conflict in Northern Ireland?

John Penrose: I understand and empathise with the hon. Gentleman and his constituents. In fact, as I visited the former Massereene Army barracks in Northern Ireland last week, I paused to pay my respects at a local memorial to two former Army engineers who were killed in 2009. There are many such memorials to individual acts of heroism or tragedy scattered not just across Northern Ireland, but around the rest of this country. Those commemorate individual actions and tragedies. The national memorial is the one in Staffordshire, and we should not underestimate its importance or value—it having been opened by Her Majesty the Queen and recording the names of everybody who has been killed on service in Northern Ireland and other conflicts.

Mr Speaker: I would gently point out that this is not an essay exchange competition; this is Question Time. For goodness’ sake, let’s speed up.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister remind the House how many brave British service personnel were killed or wounded in Operation Banner, which was the defence by this country against a terrorist onslaught in Northern Ireland?

John Penrose: Having been in the job for three and a half weeks, I am afraid that I do not have the precise number, but it was very many and the tragedy was huge.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): One of the last formal acts I did as Lord Mayor of Belfast in 2013 was to unveil a memorial stone in the Belfast City Council memorial garden to the Ulster Defence Regiment and others who served in Operation Banner. May I invite the Minister to come with me to see the memorial there and to consider how best nationally we could reflect the Government’s recognition of sacrifice in Northern Ireland?

John Penrose: I will gladly go to that memorial.

Business Promotion

2. Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): What recent steps she has taken to promote Northern Ireland businesses throughout the world. [908072]

7. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What recent steps she has taken to promote Northern Ireland businesses throughout the world. [908077]

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (John Penrose): Britain is a global trading nation and is about to become more global, so we want to promote the strengths of Northern Ireland’s business community to a global audience. So far, I have visited CM Precision Components in Downpatrick, the Causeway Chamber of Commerce, Randox in Antrim, Coca-Cola in Lisburn, Queen’s University Centre of Excellence in Precision Medicine in Belfast and many Northern Ireland representatives of the Federation of Small Businesses, Chamber of Commerce, Confederation of British Industry and Institute of Directors.

Tom Tugendhat: On every visit I make to embassies in my role as Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, it has been made very clear to me that Northern Ireland has an amazing economy that is growing and has a rightful place around the world. Does my right hon. Friend—forgive me, I meant my hon. Friend; the day is young—agree that Northern Ireland’s economic achievements would only be greater if the Northern Ireland Assembly were out there assisting and promoting it through the Northern Ireland Executive?
John Penrose: I completely agree that things would be hugely improved by a functioning Assembly and Executive. I have been in this role for only a couple of weeks, but, as a former businessman, I have been hugely impressed by the economic progress since the Belfast agreement. Northern Ireland is open for business and we want the whole world to know.

Craig Tracey: In his first few weeks of meeting businesses, what is my hon. Friend’s assessment of the unique strengths of Northern Ireland for global companies looking to grow and invest their businesses, and what support will he provide as Minister?

John Penrose: In the meetings that I have held so far, I have been hugely impressed by the skilled and stable workforce in Northern Ireland. I have also been impressed by its world-leading research—for example, in the precision medicine centre that I visited at Queen’s in Belfast—and by the strong sectoral abilities in cyber-security, life sciences and aerospace. We are doing a great deal and we need to continue to do so to promote that economic growth.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister will be aware in recent times of the success that companies have had across the globe in the agri-food sector in Northern Ireland from China to Taiwan, Australia and Dubai. There is perhaps a chance of hosting a conference in Northern Ireland to promote the agri-food business and business as a whole. Is that something in which he would be interested?

John Penrose: The short answer is yes. If the hon. Gentleman brings me the details, I will be delighted to discuss them.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): In relation to the Belfast region city deal announced in the recent Budget, will the Secretary of State justify or explain why the percentage of match funding guaranteed for Belfast is not being replicated elsewhere in the UK, most notably in my city of Dundee under the Tay cities deal?

John Penrose: As I understand it, city deals vary from place to place. They are situation and location specific almost by definition, so there is not a particular standardised approach to any one of them. They are tailored and deliberately so. I am afraid that that is what inevitably happens. With any luck, some other city deals, perhaps in other parts of Scotland, may conform more closely to what the hon. Gentleman is after.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one way to boost business in Northern Ireland will be to deal with air passenger duty and corporation tax, which are, unfortunately, devolved matters? Will he therefore encourage the institutions in Northern Ireland to get up and going again? If not, will the Government take some action?

John Penrose: My hon. Friend, the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, is absolutely right to point out that these are devolved matters and that they need to be taken forward by a devolved Assembly and Administration—the Executive. We want to encourage all sides to get going again, because, clearly, these issues are important to the people of Northern Ireland and need to be addressed.

EU Withdrawal Agreement

3. Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the EU withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland.

6. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the effect of Northern Ireland of the UK leaving the EU.

10. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the EU withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland.

12. Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the EU withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland.

13. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What assessment her Department has made of the effect on Northern Ireland of the UK leaving the EU.

14. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of the EU withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland.

15. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential effect on Northern Ireland of the EU withdrawal agreement.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): May I start by putting on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), the former Minister?

The withdrawal agreement is the best way for Northern Ireland and the whole United Kingdom to ensure that we leave the European Union. It protects all the things that we value in Northern Ireland—the constitutional and economic integrity of the UK, and vital jobs and investment—and, for the people of Northern Ireland, it continues the progress that we have made over the past two decades under the Belfast agreement.

Douglas Chapman: On Saturday 8 December, just five short days ago, the Secretary of State penned a letter to the people of Northern Ireland. The letter stated that the deal protects all the things that we value. As the Prime Minister is now desperately rushing around Europe to change that very deal, may I ask what the new letter will say this Saturday?

Karen Bradley: I stand by the comments that I made in the letter. This is the best deal to ensure that the United Kingdom leaves the European Union as one united kingdom. The Prime Minister, though, has recognised the concerns that there rightly are around the backstop, and she is seeking to address those concerns.
Liz Twist: Will the Secretary of State tell us what aspect of this deal would require the Northern Ireland Assembly to be sitting? If the Government cannot get devolution in Northern Ireland back up and running, will they resort to direct rule to implement their deal?

Karen Bradley: We all want to see the Executive back up and running, and we want to see the institutions in place. The Good Friday agreement achieved so much for the people of Northern Ireland and those institutions are such an integral part of them. I know that the politicians in Northern Ireland do want to come back to do that. I think the hon. Lady is referring to the Stormont lock in paragraph 50 of the joint report, and the Government stand by that lock.

Patrick Grady: Will the Secretary of State confirm whether she has carried out any analysis on the exact economic and competitive advantages that Northern Ireland would have over the rest of the United Kingdom in the event of the backstop being activated? If she has, will she publish them? If she has not, will she commission some?

Karen Bradley: I think that it is clear that this Government want to see us go into the future relationship with the European Union by 31 December 2020 and that the backstop is an insurance policy that none of us wants to see activated.

Alan Brown: Article 5 of the Ireland-Northern Ireland protocol on the withdrawal agreement, which states that “free movement for Union citizens and their family members, irrespective of their nationality, to, from and within Ireland”, means that people will be able to move about as part of the common travel area. So with the end of free movement post Brexit, what additional checks will be imposed on people travelling to and from Northern Ireland from the UK mainland?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman does not understand the way that the common travel area works today and the fact there is free movement across the island of Ireland for all citizens and nationalities. Of course there is a good working relationship between the Border Force agencies in Northern Ireland and their equivalents in the Republic, so that we can ensure that those who do not have the right to be in the United Kingdom do not access the United Kingdom.

Mr Sharma: Throughout the debates on the EU, we were talking about the European arrest warrant. I give the Secretary of State another opportunity today to clarify why there has been in the withdrawal agreement little in the way of commitment on the European arrest warrant, which is key to policing in Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman is quite right that the European arrest warrant is used in Northern Ireland more than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, and it is an incredibly important instrument. I hope that he has read the political declaration that accompanies the withdrawal agreement, which is clear that in the future security partnership we will have a deeper relationship with the European Union than any other third country, including on surrender of EU nationals.

Tommy Sheppard: The Prime Minister has told us that she is on a quest for “democratic legitimacy” for her agreement in respect of Northern Ireland. Is this not a curious term to use given that the one group of people who have been consistently ignored by the Government are the people of Northern Ireland, who voted not to leave the European Union?

Karen Bradley: The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. Nearly 17.5 million people in the United Kingdom, including people in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and mine, voted to leave the European Union. The people of Northern Ireland want to see this deal, because they want to see us leave the European Union in a managed way that is not chaotic and that works for Northern Ireland.

Damien Moore: What feedback has my right hon. Friend had on the withdrawal agreement from the business community in Northern Ireland, and is there any differentiation between those who are on the border and those who are not?

Karen Bradley: I have significant engagement with businesses across Northern Ireland, and I have found an absolutely consistent message, which is that those businesses, to protect jobs and to protect the progress that we have made since the Belfast agreement, want to see this deal so that Northern Ireland can leave the European Union, with the whole United Kingdom, in an orderly way. In fact, we were very pleased to welcome 12 business and civic society leaders to Westminster last week to express exactly that view.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Given the desire by all sides to avoid a hard border between the Republic and the north when we exit the European Union, why is that not, in a legally enforceable way, within the withdrawal agreement or the backstop agreement so that we use new technology for these purposes, not old and untried technology?

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend will know that the backstop can be ended, if we go into it in the first place, by the future relationship or by alternative means, and that can of course mean new technology. But at this time there is no technology that deals with the issue of the border in a way that respects the rights of the people of Northern Ireland and respects the Belfast agreement and the way that it operates.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with the evidence presented to the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee following our visit to Northern Ireland, published on Monday, saying that businesses and trade bodies in Northern Ireland are crying out for clarity and certainty as we leave the European Union?

Karen Bradley: I was delighted to find myself on the same aeroplane as the BEIS Committee on its visit to Northern Ireland, and am sure that it heard the same message I hear when I am in Northern Ireland, which is that businesses want certainty and clarity, and would like to see us implement this deal so that we can ensure that we leave the European Union in an orderly way.
Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman refers to an important point. This withdrawal agreement is the only agreement that we can guarantee is consistent with the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. He refers to paragraph 50 of the joint report. The Government’s commitments under paragraph 50 still stand, but quite rightly, we do not want to negotiate our sovereign rights, which are a sovereign matter for the United Kingdom, with the European Union. We want to do it unilaterally.

Tony Lloyd: Paragraph 50 was very clear about the role of the Assembly and the Executive. The Secretary of State’s words are not good enough. Why should the people of Northern Ireland believe that this Government are committed to devolution, to the peace process and to the Good Friday agreement?

Karen Bradley: It is this Government who have inserted in the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration on the future relationship our absolute commitment to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. It is this Government who are committed to abiding by all our commitments under paragraph 50 of the joint report, including the points about the Stormont lock and unfettered access for Northern Ireland businesses to the market of Great Britain. We stand by those commitments.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Secretary of State will be aware—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Hush for Lady Hermon.

Lady Hermon: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Since the withdrawal agreement protects the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and the consent principle as guaranteed by the Belfast/Good Friday agreement, does the Secretary of State agree that it is unforgivable for the Labour party—the architects of the Good Friday agreement—to appear to have abandoned the Good Friday agreement by voting against the Brexit deal negotiated by the Prime Minister?

Karen Bradley: I have to say that I agree with the hon. Lady. I think putting party politics above the Good Friday agreement and all that we achieved through that is unforgivable.

Legacy Consultation

4. Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): When she plans to respond to her Department’s consultation on addressing the legacy of Northern Ireland’s past.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): It is clear that more needs to be done to address the legacy of the past. The current system in Northern Ireland is not working well for anyone. This needs to change to provide better outcomes for victims and survivors of the troubles and to ensure that our armed forces and police officers are not unfairly treated.
We are carefully considering all the views received in almost 18,000 responses and intend to provide an update in due course.

Mr Francois: As the Secretary of State will recall, I have been raising with her for over a year the issue of military veterans who are being legally scapegoated for political and financial gain. It is getting worse. We now have the case of David Griffin, a retired Royal Marine, who is being reinvestigated for an alleged offence 46 years ago, of which he was cleared at the time. He is a Chelsea Pensioner. Is the Secretary of State proud of the fact that, on her watch, we have given “get out of jail free” cards to alleged IRA terrorists and we are now pursuing Chelsea Pensioners instead?

Karen Bradley: My right hon. Friend raised this case with the Prime Minister last week. I, too, am upset to see this situation. This is a result of the current system that we all want to see changed. I say very gently to my right hon. Friend that I have also wanted to work with him on finding a solution to this, and I look forward to continuing to do so, because there is no one simple solution, but we all want to see the system changed.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): While the headlines are dominated by Brexit, the sad reality is that the witch hunt against our veterans who served in Northern Ireland continues. Can the Secretary of State outline what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Defence on finding solutions to stop that witch hunt?

Karen Bradley: I can assure the hon. Lady, with whom I have spoken about this matter on a number of occasions, that I work across Government with all colleagues, because we need to find a way to deal with this issue. There is no one simple solution, but we have to have a way to deal with this that is legal, fair and proportionate.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): In supporting the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), may I remind the Secretary of State that veterans were upholding law and order in the Province and it was the terrorists who were trying to kill people? We should bear that in mind when looking at this issue as a whole.

Karen Bradley: I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that that is exactly what we are doing. We would not have seen the peace process without the hard work, dedication and dignity of our armed services and our police. They are the reason that we actually were able to have a peace process and we must never forget the sacrifice they made.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I, too, welcome the Minister of State—from [Interruption.] Thank you, ma’am—the Prime Minister is very gracious. May I welcome I believe the ninth Minister to whose substance I have stood as mere shadow? May I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Mr Vara), a decent man who is wrong on Brexit, but right on many other things?

May I ask the Secretary of State this? She has previously made it clear that she does not support a statute of limitations in Northern Ireland. Does she therefore agree either with her colleague the Secretary of State for Defence, who describes the persecution of veterans as a “ridiculous vendetta”, or with the Police Service of Northern Ireland, which says that “we have the law and…we should all be equal before it”?

Karen Bradley: It is possible to agree with both. It is a delight to respond to the hon. Gentleman, who has incredible popularity in this House. I hope that he heard the documentary on the BBC yesterday, when the Defence Secretary made it clear on the record that we are looking at every option across Government. We are working across Government on this because we all want to see a solution to this problem.

**Armed Forces Veterans**

5. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What plans does the Government have to support armed forces veterans in Northern Ireland.

Karen Bradley: It is possible to agree with both. It is a delight to respond to the hon. Gentleman, who has incredible popularity in this House. I hope that he heard the documentary on the BBC yesterday, when the Defence Secretary made it clear on the record that we are looking at every option across Government. We are working across Government on this because we all want to see a solution to this problem.

Victoria Prentis: Will the Secretary of State ensure that any proposals that she brings forward to deal with the legacy of the past are balanced and proportionate, and that our brave veterans are fairly treated?

Karen Bradley: I can absolutely give my hon. Friend that guarantee.

Ian Paisley: Three hundred and nineteen Royal Ulster Constabulary officers murdered, 258 Ulster Defence Regiment soldiers murdered, and over 200 of those cases unresolved—what is the Secretary of State going to do to bring justice to those gallant members from our community?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman puts it very well. We need to see this issue dealt with. The current system is not working for anybody. We need to see it resolved. We are working through almost 18,000 responses to the consultation and we look forward to working across the House to find a resolution that works for everyone.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Secretary of State is also proposing to support some of the 500 victims of the troubles with a victims pension. Can she tell us when the first payments will be made?

Karen Bradley: The hon. Gentleman knows better than anyone that this is a devolved matter. It is a frustration that we do not have an Assembly and an Executive in place to make these decisions, but I want to see progress made.
Q1. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 12 December.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with all those caught up in the horrific incident in Strasbourg last night, and we stand ready to give whatever support the French authorities may need.

Today, I will have meetings—possibly many meetings—with ministerial colleagues and others.

Kerry McCarthy: Just a normal day in the office then, Prime Minister. I also want to give my condolences for the tragic events in the beautiful city of Strasbourg.

Last year, the Prime Minister told us that there was not going to be a general election, and then there was. This week, she told us that she was not going to pull the meaningful vote, and then she did. Can I ask her now if she is going to rule out having a general election and a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: Can I say to the hon. Lady, first of all, that I think that a general election at this point in time, in the middle of our negotiations, would not be in the national interest? Secondly, as she will have heard me say before in this House, I think we should respect the result of the referendum that took place in 2016.

Q6. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): Given what we could call uncertainty about the future of the withdrawal agreement, could the Prime Minister give people some certainty—that is, EU nationals in the UK—that whatever happens to that deal, they will be allowed to stay on roughly the same terms that are in that draft agreement?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point, because I know that EU nationals living here in the United Kingdom will be concerned about what might happen if a deal is not agreed. We have been very clear as a Government that the withdrawal agreement that we have agreed does respect the rights, and protect and guarantee the rights, of EU citizens living here. But in the unlikely event of no deal, I have been clear that this Government will still protect EU citizens’ rights, and we would wish to know that actually, other EU Governments would respect the rights of UK citizens living in the EU as well.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I am sure that the whole House will join me in joining the Prime Minister in condemning the shootings in Strasbourg and extending our sympathy to the families of those that have been killed or injured there.

I am delighted to see the Prime Minister back in her place after her little journeys. Having told the media this morning that she has made progress, can she now update the House on what changes she has secured to her deal?

The Prime Minister: I travelled to Europe yesterday and met several Heads of Government, the Commission and the European Council, precisely because I had listened to concerns raised in the House. I took them to Europe, and no one I met yesterday is in any doubt about the strength of concern in the House about the duration of the backstop. I am interested that the right hon. Gentleman wants to know what progress we have made, because actually he could not care less what I bring back from Brussels. He has been clear that whatever comes back from Brussels he will vote against it, because all he wants to do is create chaos in our economy, division in our society and damage to our economy. That’s Labour. That’s Corbyn.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is very clear that nothing has changed. If the Prime Minister needed any clarification about the temporary nature of the backstop, she need not have gone to Europe; she could have just asked her Attorney General, who said it endured indefinitely.

As the Prime Minister may recall, when she left on her journey, we were about to start day four of a five-day debate on the deal. Since she has not achieved any changes, either to the withdrawal agreement or to the future partnership, will she now confirm that we will have the concluding days of debate and votes within the next seven days, before the House rises for the Christmas recess?

The Prime Minister: I had discussions with people yesterday, and I have made some progress, but of course there is an EU Council meeting and further discussions are to be held. The right hon. Gentleman asks about the meaningful vote. The meaningful vote has been deferred, and the date of that vote will be announced in the normal way. The business motion will be agreed and discussed in the usual way. [HON. MEMBERS: “When?”] I will tell Opposition Members when. We had a meaningful vote in the referendum in 2016 and, if he wants a meaningful date, I will give him one: 29 March 2019, when we leave the European Union.

Jeremy Corbyn: That is totally and utterly unacceptable to this House. This House agreed a programme motion. This House agreed the five days of debate. This House agreed when the vote would take place. The Government unilaterally pulled that and denied the House the chance of a vote on this crucial matter. The Prime Minister and her Government have already been found in contempt of Parliament. Her behaviour today is just contemptuous of this Parliament and this process. Her appalling behaviour needs to be held to account by the House. The people of this country are more and more concerned about the ongoing chaos at the centre of her Government. [INTERUPTION]

Mr Speaker: Order. We must have calm on both sides of the House. [INTERUPTION] Order. The questions will be heard, however long it takes, and so will the answers. Do not try to shout down. All you do is wear out your voices, and you will not succeed. Amen. End of subject.

Jeremy Corbyn: When the Prime Minister made her Lancaster House speech, she set out her negotiating objectives, and they are worth quoting. The first objective is crucial:

“We will provide certainty wherever we can.”

Does this look or feel like certainty? Can she mark her own homework?
The Prime Minister: Indeed we have at every stage—the right hon. Gentleman said we would not get agreement in December, and we did; he said we would not get the implementation period in March, and we did; he said we would not get a withdrawal agreement and political declaration, and we did. Concerns have been raised about the backstop. As I said, we continue those discussions, and no one yesterday was left in any doubt about the strength of feeling in the House. Of course, we all know what his answer to the backstop is: ignore the referendum and stay in the EU.

Jeremy Corbyn: If this is an agreement, why will the Prime Minister not put that agreement to a vote of this House?

The Federation of Small Businesses says that planning ahead is impossible. Many, many other people around the country find planning ahead impossible, because all that they see is chaos at the heart of Government and an inability to plan anything for the future. Yesterday the cross-party Exiting the European Union Committee, including Conservative Members, unanimously found that the Prime Minister’s deal “fails to offer sufficient clarity or certainty about the future.”

Will the Prime Minister give the country at least some certainty and categorically rule out the option of no deal?

The Prime Minister: The way to ensure that there is no no deal is to agree a deal. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the impact on businesses. I will tell him what will have an impact on businesses up and down the country: what we learnt just a few days ago, that the shadow Chancellor wants to change the law so that—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The Prime Minister’s reply must be heard, and it will be.

The Prime Minister: Businesses will be affected by the fact that the shadow Chancellor wants to change the law so that trade unions in this country can go on strike in solidarity with any strike anywhere in the world. That may be solidarity with trade unions. It is not solidarity with small businesses, and it is not solidarity with the ordinary working people who would pay the price of Labour.

Jeremy Corbyn: My question was, would the Prime Minister rule out no deal? She has failed to do that.

Let me tell the Prime Minister that this sorry saga is frustrating for businesses, for workers, and, actually, for many of those behind her as well. Many of them are trying to work constructively to find a solution. Yesterday, her former Brexit Minister said that a new customs union with the EU “could be the basis for a parliamentary consensus”. When will she start listening to people who actually want to find a constructive solution, rather than denying Parliament the right to debate it and vote on her deal?

The Prime Minister: We all know one group of people who do not want to find a constructive solution: the Labour party’s Front Bench. That is what we see on the other side of the Chamber: no plan, no clue, no Brexit.

Jeremy Corbyn: The time for dithering and delay is over. The Prime Minister has negotiated her deal—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will be heard.

Jeremy Corbyn: The time for dithering and delay by this Government is over. The Prime Minister has negotiated her deal. She has told us that it is the best and only deal available. There can be no more excuses, no more running away: put it before Parliament and let us have the vote. Whatever happens with the Prime Minister’s Conservative leadership vote today is utterly irrelevant to the lives of people across our country. It does nothing to solve the Government’s inability to get a deal that works for the whole country. The Prime Minister has already been found to be in contempt of Parliament. Will she now put this deal before Parliament and halt the escalating crisis which is so damaging to the lives of so many people in this country?

The Prime Minister: We all know from the multiplicity of changes in plan that we have seen from the Labour party that there is one thing we can be sure about: whatever U-turn comes next in Labour’s policy, the right hon. Gentleman will send out—[Interruption.] He will send out—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I said a moment ago that the Leader of the Opposition must be heard, and, belatedly, he was; and the Prime Minister will be heard.

The Prime Minister: Whatever change in Labour policy we see, the right hon. Gentleman will send out his henchman to reveal it all to the world: “The Inconstant Gardiner.” [Interruption.] Somebody will explain that to the Leader of the Opposition a little later. The right hon. Gentleman should be honest with people about his position: he could not care less about Brexit; what he wants to do is bring down the Government, create uncertainty, sow division and crash our economy. The biggest threat to people and to this country is not in leaving the EU; it is a Corbyn Government.

Q8. [908163] Paul Masterton (East Renfrewshire) (Con): A few weeks ago Ben McKenzie from Neilston, a pupil at Eastwood High School, took his own life, having been the victim of cruel online threats and bullying on social media and his mobile phone; he was just 13 years old. Nearly £10,000 has been raised in his memory for Beautiful Inside and Out, a Scottish charity that supports the families of victims of child suicide. Can the Prime Minister set out what this Government are going to do to tackle cyber-bullying not just to support and empower victims, but to deter and prevent children who might be engaging in these acts without realising the consequences they can have, because no family should be enduring a Christmas without their child due to suicide?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend has raised an extremely serious issue and I am sure the thoughts and condolences of the whole House are with Ben’s family at this terrible time after this terrible tragedy. We need to address cyber-bullying in both ways, as my hon. Friend said: both working with the internet companies on what is put out on their platforms and with schools to help people recognise this material and deal with it, and supporting those children who could, as my hon. Friend said, be the victims or who might be carrying out these attacks. Our consultation last year on internet
safety showed that despite a range of voluntary initiatives and good work by a range of charities—I commend the work of the Scottish charity Beautiful Inside and Out—the amount of money that has been raised—this remains a serious issue for millions of people. I know the Scottish Government have been addressing this with their “Respect for All” approach, and we have funded the UK Safer Internet Centre, which is providing guidance for schools, but we should all be taking this issue seriously and the Government will continue to work on this.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister on cyber-bullying and indeed on the terrible tragedy yesterday in Strasbourg?

We were promised “strong and stable” and we were promised a vote on the Brexit deal, but this Prime Minister cannot even do her own job because of the Tory civil war. This Government are an embarrassment. Christmas is just two weeks away; will the Prime Minister promise a vote on the Brexit deal, but this Prime Minister cannot even do her own job because of the Tory civil war. This Government are an embarrassment. Christmas is just two weeks away; will the Prime Minister bring forward her meaningful vote on the Brexit deal next week?

The Prime Minister: As I have said, we are having discussions with European leaders and others and those discussions will continue. What matters is that they are in no doubt about the strength of feeling in this House on the issue of the duration of the backstop and they are in no doubt about the strength of feeling in this House that that should be addressed in a way that has legal force, and that is what we are discussing and continuing to negotiate with the European Union. As I said earlier, the date of the deferred vote and debate on this will be announced in due course in the normal way.

Ian Blackford: That is contemptuous of Parliament. Parliament voted for a meaningful vote; we should be having the vote and it should be happening next week. This Government are a farce: the Tory party is in chaos, the Prime Minister is a disgrace through her actions. The reality is that people across Scotland and the UK are seeing this today. Prime Minister, take responsibility, do the right thing: resign.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes his remarks about deferring the vote, but it is precisely because I and my colleagues in Government have listened to the views of people across Scotland and the UK who are seeing this today, Prime Minister, take responsibility, do the right thing: resign.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman makes his remarks about deferring the vote, but it is precisely because I and my colleagues in Government have listened to the views of people across this House that we are pursuing this issue further with the European Union. That is being respectful of the views that have been raised in this House.

Q10. [908165] Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Many businesses up and down the country have put their plans on hold while waiting for us here in Parliament to agree our future trading relationship with our biggest and closest neighbour. Does the Prime Minister agree that their interests, and those of their workers, their suppliers and the country as a whole, are best served by concluding the agreement with the remaining 27 and by those on this side of the House supporting her in the vote this evening?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, and I agree with him, particularly on the need to ensure that we do not increase or create more uncertainty. The public voted to leave the EU and they want us to secure a deal that delivers on that result. We should not risk handing control of the Brexit negotiations to Opposition MPs in Parliament, because that would risk delaying or even stopping Brexit. None of that would be in the national interest, so I think we need to get on and deliver a good Brexit for the country.

Q2. [908157] Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): When I stood for election, I vowed not to vote for any Brexit deal that was not in the best interests of Lewisham West and Penge. After pulling the Brexit vote, the Prime Minister must now concede that her deal is doomed. The House and her own party appear to have no confidence in her, but will she have confidence in the people and give them a say with a people’s vote, including an option to remain in the EU?

The Prime Minister: We have deferred the vote on the agreement. On the issue that the hon. Lady raises about putting the vote to the people, I say to her, as I said to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) and as I have said on many occasions in this House, that the House put its faith in the votes of the people of this country when we decided to give them the referendum in 2016. People voted to leave the European Union and it is now our duty to deliver on that.

Q12. [908167] Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): This House has a duty to ensure that the next generation live better lives tomorrow than we live today, so how does my right hon. Friend respond to the audit carried out by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists that found that three quarters of the hundreds of babies who die or suffer brain damage each year could be saved by better care? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that every expectant mother and unborn baby receives appropriate monitoring?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. I know that it is close to the hearts of many Members of the House. Every death or injury of a child is a tragedy, and we have a commitment to halving the rates of stillbirth, neonatal death and brain injury after birth by 2025. That is supported by system-wide action under our national maternity safety strategy. We are increasing midwifery training places by 25% and investing millions of pounds in training for staff and in new safety equipment to ensure that the NHS can provide world-class care for mothers and babies, but we recognise that we need to continue to ensure that we do all we can, and I can give my hon. Friend the reassurance that we will do that.

Q3. [908158] Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): As the right hon. Lady reflects on her premiership, may I ask her which of the following judgments she most regrets: laying down red lines before the Brexit talks had even begun; wasting precious negotiating time on a general election; or consistently failing to face down the hardliners on her own Benches and reach out to forge a consensus in this House and the country?

The Prime Minister: I will tell the hon. Gentleman the judgment that was the right one. It was to accept the vote of the people in the referendum, to deliver on the vote of the people and to deliver a good Brexit for the future of this country.
Q15. [908170] Damien Moore (Southport) (Con): Small businesses are the backbone of my constituency. In the Budget, the Chancellor announced a revitalisation fund for our high streets. May I ask my right hon. Friend when it will be made available? It will prove a vital lifeline for my constituency, because of the anti-business policies of Labour-controlled Sefton Council.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the help that we have announced for the high street. He is absolutely right that the Leader of the Opposition may stand up and claim to be interested in business and small businesses, but we so often see Labour councils up and down the country doing exactly the opposite. We have provided £675 million in the future high streets fund so that plans can be made to help to make high streets and town centres fit for the future, and we will be publishing a prospectus for the fund shortly.

Q4. [908159] Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister confirm which of these is worse: no deal or no Brexit?


The Prime Minister: It is important that we deliver on Brexit for the people of this country. I believe that we should do that with a good deal with the European Union, and I believe that that is what we have negotiated. I also believe, as my hon. Friend, that the Member for Aldershot (Leo Docherty) said from a sedentary position, that the worst thing for this country would be a Labour Government.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): At a time of grave national crisis on an issue that we all agree is of huge importance to future generations, can my right hon. Friend think of anything more unhelpful, irrelevant and irresponsible than for the Conservative party to embark on weeks of a Conservative leadership election?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. and learned Friend, through his chairmanship of the APPG, has taken this matter seriously and has been championing it for a long time. I hope that he is pleased to see this piece of work being done, and I am sure that he will want to carry on to ensure that financial education is taking place and that young people are prepared for their future lives.

Q7. [908162] Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): The economy is stalling, business investment is falling, and we have the grotesque—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I could not care less what somebody chuntering from a sedentary position says or is or is not the truth; what I care about is that the hon. Lady will not be shouted down any more than any other Member in this place will be shouted down. Be quiet and listen.

Mary Creagh: The economy is stalling, business investment is plummeting and we have the grotesque spectacle of Tory MPs putting party interest before the public interest. If the Prime Minister survives tonight’s vote, will she finally rule out no deal, face down her hard Brexiteers, let this place vote down her deal and put it back to the public in a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: First, if the hon. Lady wants to ensure no deal, the way to ensure no deal is to agree a deal. That is the best way to ensure there is no deal. She talks about the economy: employment is at a record high, wages are growing and we have had 23 consecutive quarters of growth, the longest run in the G7. That is a balanced approach to the economy. That is Conservatives delivering for the people of this country.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend to take her mind back to September 1997, when a referendum was held in...
Wales? The result of that referendum was 50.3% in favour of an Assembly and 49.7% against, on a turnout of 50%. Nobody questioned whether we should accept the referendum. Does that hold any future reference for us?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for making a very important point about the principle that was accepted at that time, which was, however small the margin, the overall result of the vote should be accepted and acted on.

Q9. [908164] Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Last week, I hosted an event to raise money for Hallam FM’s Mission Christmas, a charity doing fantastic work helping children in need in my constituency, and for the local food bank. Indeed, many of the 41% of children living in poverty in my constituency, and for the local food bank. What message does the Prime Minister have for those working hard to make ends meet but who will find themselves drawn into gangs and the use of knives, to prevent them from doing so and to prevent these crimes from happening in the first place.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend share my concerns and those of my constituents about the further delays and increased costs of Crossrail, and the failures of Transport for London and the Labour Mayor of London?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely share my right hon. Friend’s concerns and his constituents’ concerns, and indeed my constituency is also affected by the delay of Crossrail. Yes, we should recognise the role that TfL and the Labour Mayor of London have played in this. We want to see Crossrail. It is going to be of benefit to my right hon. Friend’s constituents and mine, and the Labour Mayor needs to get his finger out on this.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Residents in Erewash are clear that we need a strong Government to deliver on Brexit and on our domestic agenda. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is time for us to unite on the Conservative Benches, as the real threat to our great nation is the party opposite and a Labour Government?

The Prime Minister: I echo my hon. Friend’s comments. Many members of the public want us to get on with Brexit and to ensure that we are delivering for them on the domestic agenda, like the record number of new homes we have seen being built—the best number ever, bar one year, in the last 31 years. It is important that we get on to that domestic agenda, and to do that we must unite as a party and bring our country back together again. She is absolutely right that the greatest threat to the jobs, livelihoods and futures of her constituents, and constituents around the United Kingdom, would be a Labour Government.

Q11. [908166] Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): Last month, a 16-year-old boy was tragically killed in a knife attack in my constituency. This came as knife crime has almost doubled in Coventry over the last five years. I know that some good multi-agency work is happening in this field, but does the Prime Minister still think that we have enough police officers on our streets to be able to fight crime and the fear of crime?

The Prime Minister: I extend my condolences to the family of the hon. Lady’s constituent who suffered this terrible attack. Obviously there is a concern, and I recognise that concern, about the rise in violent crime, which is why the Government have produced the serious violence strategy. Members on both sides of the House, on a cross-party basis, sit on the serious violence taskforce. We are giving extra powers to the police to tackle knife crime through the Offensive Weapons Bill, and we have strengthened firearms control through the Policing and Crime Act 2017.

This is not just about police action. We have announced the £200 million youth endowment fund, which will help to work with young people who otherwise might find themselves drawn into gangs and the use of knives, to prevent them from doing so and to prevent these crimes from happening in the first place.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): In 1997, the British Prime Minister issued an apology to the people of Ireland for Britain’s historic role in the great famine—a famine that saw 1 million people die and 1 million people be displaced from their homeland. That apology sent out a powerful and important message. Will this Prime Minister condemn any notion that food shortages in Ireland will be used to strengthen Britain’s negotiating hand during the Brexit negotiations?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to absolutely give that assurance. We would not use that issue in any sense in the negotiating strategy. We want to work with the Irish Government to ensure that we are providing a good Brexit for the UK and for Ireland, and I believe that would be a good Brexit for the European Union.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): One of my constituents in Oadby has written to me to say, “I voted for Brexit and I urge you to support our Prime Minister unreservedly and vote for this Brexit deal.” Another constituent in Great Glen says, “The Prime Minister has done a terrible job in trying circumstances. The headbangers from all sides and the supine attitude of the Labour party has meant she has had an impossible job, but she has done so well.” Finally, a third from Saddington writes, “I am an employer of 30 people in the Harborough constituency. To vote against the deal will cause political chaos and open the door to the worst possible scenario for this country—a far left Labour Government.” Does the Prime Minister agree with me that my constituents have got a lot more common sense than the Members opposite, who want to stop Brexit and fundamentally damage our democracy?

The Prime Minister: I think, Mr Speaker, that this can be an occasion where I give a very short answer: yes.
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The self-serving chaos unleashed on this Parliament this week is emblematic of the way in which this Government have consistently treated the people of our country. In the light of the Prime Minister’s conduct, the pound has fallen by 2% in the past 48 hours—her Budget’s equivalent of running the entire NHS for six weeks. Does she believe that this is a price worth paying for her Brexit deal?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady talks about what the Government are doing for the NHS. It is this Government who are establishing a 10-year plan for the sustainability of the NHS and putting the biggest cash boost in its history into the NHS to ensure it is there for all our constituents, now and in the future.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Prime Minister agree that we all owe a huge debt of gratitude to our police officers, prison officers and probation staff, who are in the frontline of keeping us all safe, which is the first duty of any Government? In that regard, may I ask her to take a close and personal interest in the 2019-20 police funding settlement?

The Prime Minister: First, let me agree with my hon. Friend; we do owe an enormous debt of gratitude to all those who are on the frontline, putting themselves potentially at risk for us—not only police officers, but prison officers and probation officers, whom he referenced. I assure him that, as he has, I have been looking, with the Home Secretary, at the 2019-20 police funding settlement.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The plotters behind her know that any replacement Prime Minister would face exactly the same party arithmetic and exactly the same deadlock on Brexit. This deadlock can be changed only by going back to the people. Today, The Times also said that is her only chance of saving her job and saving her deal. So can she tell the House: what exactly is she afraid of?

The Prime Minister: The issue is that this House overwhelmingly voted to give the choice to the British people as to whether or not to leave the European Union. The British people chose to leave the European Union and I strongly believe it is the duty of Members of this House to deliver on that vote.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What does the Prime Minister consider most important: playing parliamentary parlour games in this place, or protecting jobs and businesses by going back to the negotiating table and thrashing out a deal that will pass through this House?

The Prime Minister: It is in the interests of employers and in the interests of people whose jobs are at stake to make sure that we get a good deal with the European Union. That is why it is important that I was in Europe yesterday and will continue to be in Europe doing exactly as my hon. Friend says: negotiating the deal that I believe can get the support of this House to ensure we can move forward and deliver a good Brexit.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): Does the Prime Minister judge that it is more welcome or more appropriate to face a no confidence motion from her Back Benchers or from the Leader of the Opposition?

The Prime Minister: Obviously, one of those will take place. What I think is important for everybody in this House is to recognise that we have, I believe, a solemn duty to deliver on the result of the 2016 referendum. I believe the best way of doing that is with a good Brexit deal with the European Union that protects jobs and honours the referendum. I believe that is the deal we have negotiated.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the hon. Gentleman, whose mellifluous tones we listened to only a few moments ago, that I am very happy to entertain a point of order, but that it should come after the urgent question. I am sure he will retain the thrust of it in his head and he will share it with the House in due course. We will await that with eager anticipation, but not until we have had the urgent question from Emily Thornberry.
Institute for Statecraft: Integrity Initiative

12.42 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs to make a statement on his Department’s funding of the Institute for Statecraft’s integrity initiative.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Institute for Statecraft is an independent UK-based charity whose work seeks to improve governance and enhance national security. It runs a project called the integrity initiative, which is working to counter disinformation overseas by bringing together groups of experts to analyse and discuss the problem posed by Russian disinformation.

The Government are funding this initiative with nearly £2 million this financial year. That funding covers its activity outside the UK and it does not fund any activity within the UK; nor does it fund the management of the integrity initiative’s social media account. Recent reports that Foreign Office funding has been used to support party political activity in the UK are therefore wholly untrue.

Emily Thornberry: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I thank the Minister of State for his opening remarks.

Let me make it clear at the outset that I have no interest today in debating the integrity initiative’s purpose of countering the very real threat of interference in western democracies and the spread of disinformation by the Russian state. If a debate needs to happen on how that objective is best pursued, it is best left for another day. The issue before us today is much more simple and fundamental: it is a cardinal rule of public life in our country that official resources should not be used for political purposes, a rule we saw symbolised this very morning when the Prime Minister delivered her statement outside Downing Street with the usual Government coat of arms removed from her lectern because of the political nature of her statement. There is, I am afraid, absolutely no doubt that the publicly funded integrity initiative has broken that rule repeatedly by using its Twitter accounts to disseminate articles attacking the integrity of Conservative and Labour officials, of Conservative peers and, repeatedly, of the Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition.

I greatly welcome the Minister’s statement on Monday, in which he totally condemned such behaviour by a publicly funded organisation, and said that not only must it stop, but that he wanted to know “why on earth it happened in the first place”.

That is doubly important in this case, because the integrity initiative’s use of Twitter as a tool for disseminating information has not been a fringe activity, but is an integral part of its applications for Foreign Office funding over the past two years. Indeed, the budget for its agreed objectives of increasing reporting in the media and expanding the impact of its website and Twitter account amounted to £275,000 in this financial year. In the list of key deliverables it promised the Foreign Office this year, it stated explicitly that one of its instruments of delivery will be its “600-plus Twitter followers, including influential players”.

In the light of all that, I hope that the Minister of State can answer some more questions to explain, as he put it, why on earth that misuse of public funds has taken place. First, were Foreign Office officials monitoring the integrity initiative’s social media output, given that it was an integral part of the activity for which it was being funded? If so, why did they not flag up concerns to him about the dissemination of personal attacks? If not, why was this misuse of public funds going unchecked? Secondly, does the funding agreement governing the integrity initiative make clear that its use of funds and its public statements must comply with Cabinet Office rules? Finally, if the Government intend to renew that funding for the next financial year, what arrangements and agreements will be put in place to ensure that nothing of this sort ever happens again?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a matter of regret, Mr Speaker, that the right hon. Lady did not listen to the answer that I gave a moment ago. Let me explain to the House what has been going on. The Institute for Statecraft was hacked several weeks ago and numerous documents were published and amplified by Kremlin news channels. The Russian state media campaign that followed fits with a wider pattern of Russian disinformation against the UK. This campaign’s objective is clear: it is yet another example of Russian disinformation intended to confuse audiences and discredit an organisation that is working independently to tackle the threat of disinformation. The current Russian disinformation activity is precisely the sort of disinformation that this project is designed to counter. It is regrettable, but perhaps rather unsurprising, that some have been fooled, and have used this to make accusations about British politics in exactly the way hoped for in this malign activity.

While that is going on in the UK, the sort of activity that we do fund is doing its utmost to counter Russian disinformation overseas, which is undermining democracy and its institutions ever more widely across the world. The FCO has given a grant to the Institute for Statecraft this financial year of nearly £2 million. Our agreement, written into the contract with the institute, specifically states that the grant must not be used to support activity intended to influence, or attempt to influence, the UK Parliament, Government or political parties. We have not seen any evidence that the integrity initiative has breached this obligation, and the accusation that Government money has been used for domestic political purposes is utterly unfounded.

Emily Thornberry: What?

Sir Alan Duncan: I say once again to the right hon. Lady that no Foreign Office funding is used for the initiative’s UK domestic activity. She can look at me as aghast as she likes, but the money that comes from the Foreign Office is used for activity overseas, and she should accept that as the—[Interruption.]

If she does not accept it, she should say in terms what she is accusing me of, because that would be a breach of the forms of the House.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It would clearly be concerning if any Foreign Office money was being used for party political activities, so I welcome the Minister’s reassurances. Will he confirm that an investigation has been launched to see what has happened, and that when a proper, independent investigation has come to proper conclusions, he will take action on them?
Sir Alan Duncan: Perhaps one of the accurate things that the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) said was that when I was interviewed on Radio 4 and this matter was sprung on me, I said that I would look into it straightaway, and I did. I have established the facts and I am satisfied that our money does not go towards funding any kind of UK domestic activity.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Rubbish!

Sir Alan Duncan: Mr Speaker, I have been accused of speaking rubbish by the hon. Lady. She should mark her words carefully before she bellows untruths at me across the House.

Mr Speaker: Order. Nobody should bellow across the House from either side. I know that the right hon. Minister of State is very well able to look after himself. The word “rubbish” is sadly used relatively frequently in the House, and it is certainly not unparliamentary. It is a matter of taste rather than of order. I am glad to see the right hon. Minister of State breaking out into a smile. It would be more seemly if colleagues would conduct these exchanges in a slightly more restrained fashion. To that end, I now look in hope—possibly in anticipation—to Mr Stephen Gethins.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I wish to put on record that a number of FCO-funded non-governmental organisations do extraordinary work in the most difficult circumstances. Before I came to this place, I worked in the south Caucasus and the western Balkans, where many of those organisations do that extraordinary work. They desire our support for doing that but, more than anything else, they need to know that the Foreign Office has full openness and transparency. Our most powerful tool against any Russian misinformation is respect for the rule of law, the democratic process and, critically, transparency; we owe that to those working in these organisations. The Minister will be well aware of many people who work in very difficult circumstances and find themselves at the hard edge of Russian disinformation campaigns.

We need to have confidence in our democratic process. There should be no undermining of politicians, be they Labour, Scottish National party or Conservative, or of anybody else. What further steps will the Minister take to ensure that impartiality and integrity goes to the very heart of all funding that comes from the Foreign Office? I hope that he will consider the tone of the question I am putting to him, and will agree with me that those who are doing difficult work in difficult conflict environments deserve the full support of this House, and to know that the Foreign Office has their back.

Sir Alan Duncan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for both what he asked and the tone in which he asked it. He has experience of these issues and I share in pretty well everything that he just said. The integrity initiative, in its activity abroad, endeavours to deliver exactly that sort of transparency to counter fake news and disinformation, in the way that I think the hon. Gentleman and all of us would hope. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury said in her opening remarks that she would support that sort of activity.

What is more, this charity is incorporated in Scotland, so it is subject to the Scottish Charity Regulator, and that kind of non-partisan activity is required. Within the UK, the charity does some automatic retweeting of stories that relate to Russia. Of course, on some occasions that includes mentions of the right hon. Leader of the Opposition; equally, there could be mention of a Conservative, as indeed has happened on many occasions. It has been judged to be no more than non-partisan repetition of stories that relate to Russia.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am reassured to know that we are taking on Russian misinformation. I am right to be, aren’t I?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, my right hon. Friend is right to be. The whole House should appreciate that this is an ever-increasing challenge, and one that we need to meet in the cyber field, as we do in the information field. That is what we are doing.

Emily Thornberry: In a united way.

Sir Alan Duncan: The right hon. Gentleman says from a sedentary position “in a united way”—yes, and she could add to that unity by recognising the truth of what I have said, instead of denying it in her normal way.

Emily Thornberry: I’m not a gentleman. I have never been a gentleman.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Minister said that the Institute for Statecraft was hacked several weeks ago. Will he clarify for the House whether that hacking extended to the Twitter account of the integrity initiative, which has been retweeting articles that are undoubtedly critical of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, and the Opposition’s policy?

Sir Alan Duncan: The answer is that I do not know, but if information is on a Twitter account, it is publicly available anyway. It is the information that was not publicly available that was hacked, and I deplore that hack. That is what is now being used by Russian-inspired sources to create the sort of encounters we are witnessing here today.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This is the first time I have come across an accusation from a Labour party spokesperson that retweeting a New Statesman article was a smear against Labour. Despite the fact that the Government’s financial support has nothing to do with the institute’s UK activities, will my right hon. Friend reassure Members that if any evidence is found that the institute is involved in efforts to discredit the Labour party, he would unequivocally condemn such behaviour?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes. If our funding were being used for that, then yes, I would condemn it, and the contract would be withdrawn. Interruption. / I hear again from a Labour Front Bencher an accusation, which I have categorically denied today, that Foreign Office funding is paying for UK Twitter activity and the management of the institute’s account. I say to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who has been shouting
Mr Grealish: Is it not the case, sir, that we are concerned about not just the Russian propaganda channel RT and the Sputnik news service but that the Government were to engage in the kind of investigation that the hon. Member for Glasgow North referred to, whether they originate from Russia, Saudi Arabia, the hard right in the United States of America or Syria—or, for that matter, in Catalonia last year. I want to make sure that a project such as this really works, but it will not have the confidence of the whole nation unless we are able to see some changes in the way in which it operates in this case. I would have more confidence if the Government were to engage in the kind of investigation that is ongoing in the United States of America into Russian involvement in democratic process in this country. Why can we not have that investigation?

Sir Alan Duncan: I fully agree. We should not be taken for a sucker. If we allow malign forces to divide us and try to rule over us, that is what will have happened to us. Again, I urge the Front Benchers of Her Majesty’s Opposition to appreciate that this is a proper part of government activity—within the rules, according to a contract—and it behoves them to accept the assurances that have been so clearly and openly given today.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On the allegations of Russian influence, is the Minister aware of concerns about some activities of peers in the House of Lords who are representing Russian companies, including Lord Truscott, who is the remunerated chairman of the advisory board of Russian Gold Fund, which is a private equity investment fund about which it is possible to find out precisely nothing, including who is investing in it and where the money is going?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is not for me to comment on the propriety or otherwise of any Member of the House of Lords. It has its own standards and rules, and it is for that House to apply those rules as it sees fit.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the robust way in which he has answered these questions. Will he ensure that the Institute for Statecraft reviews its editorial policy so that we counter Russian fake news and disinformation and so that it does not fall foul of criticising UK politicians?

Sir Alan Duncan: I am very happy to say yes. I can assure my hon. Friend and the House that when it comes to challenging officials on any issue, I do so very robustly, to establish the highest standards of activity in everything the Foreign Office does. Therefore, in response to this situation, I have certainly been grilling officials to find out exactly what is happening. I have asked them to engage with the Institute for Statecraft to look at its editorial policy to ensure that there is, and will remain, an absolutely clear division between its domestic activity under its charitable rules and any overseas activity that we fund and is subject to the contract we have.
Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend explain why the Government are still not in favour of expelling the Russian Federation from the Council of Europe? The Russian Federation is in breach of all its international obligations, yet the Government are not doing what they could do, which is to expel it from the Council of Europe.

Sir Alan Duncan: I understand what my hon. Friend is saying, but a matter of that sort is for the Council of Europe and I know that the parliamentary representatives are discussing it. Russia has not paid its dues and this question is being discussed regularly.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): May I just observe that the Minister seems to be rather affronted by the anger felt on this side of the House, particularly by my Front-Bench colleagues, on this issue? He really need not; he ought to be sharing in that anger. Does he think that the investigation that he has undertaken so far is sufficient, or does he plan any further inquiry into this matter? Does he think he has done enough?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, I do not share in the anger because the accusations that are being made are misplaced and have been categorically denied. Right hon. Ladies and Gentlemen in particular should accept the assurance on that basis.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am delighted that the Foreign Office is spending money trying to counter the disinformation and fake news that is coming not just from Russia but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said, from all over the world. What comments has the Minister given to this organisation to impress upon it that its domestic use of its Twitter account, whether right or wrong, may be undermining what it is trying to do internationally?

Sir Alan Duncan: I actually think that that is a perfectly fair question about whether the domestic activity of the organisation somehow taints the legitimate and Foreign Office-funded international activity. What I resent very deeply is Members of this House not accepting the assurances given that Foreign Office funding does not pay for that domestic activity. In the organisation’s defence, I think that all it does is to forward from already open website articles anything that happens to mention Russia. It is deemed to have done so on a non-partisan basis, so in as much as it may occasionally mention the Leader of the Opposition, it could also mention anyone on the Conservative side. That distinction ought to be accepted and understood, particularly by Opposition Front Benchers. I have undertaken to conduct exactly that sort of review, because it is important that our activity is clear, distinct and not in any way muddled with the sort of activity that the hon. Gentleman is describing.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Will the Minister clarify when the Foreign Office became aware that the account had been hacked? Was it before or after the press coverage?

Sir Alan Duncan: I suspect, although I am partly speculating, that the Foreign Office probably knew fairly quickly. The matter did not necessarily come to Ministers straightaway, probably because it was not deemed to be that serious. Unfortunately, these things happen all too frequently at the moment.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): According to documents that the company itself has filed with Companies House, one of the directors describes his own occupation as “senior civil servant”. Now, it may be that that is his former rather than his present occupation, but a simple glance at his career indicates that he has held a number of senior and presumably sensitive posts within both Her Majesty’s Government and NATO. Will the Minister tell us whether the Government were aware, until now, that this individual held that directorship? Were the Government involved in any way in nominating or recommending him for that position? And what approval of authorisation, if any, did the individual require before he became a director of what is, as the Minister has said, is an independent company limited by guarantee?

Mr Speaker: It was very cheeky of the hon. Gentleman to ask three questions, but I am sure the Minister will respond.

Sir Alan Duncan: I believe that I would be right in saying that perhaps the reason for this is that NATO is also a funder of this activity. Therefore, I imagine that the name to which the hon. Gentleman refers has a connection with NATO. However, should this be inaccurate, I will of course write to him straightaway.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): In the end, this is about trust. In a recent parliamentary question to do with public money to fund social media ads to promote the Brexit deal, I asked the Government whether they would place the contents of these ads in the Library for us all to see. Unfortunately, this request was declined. Does the Minister agree that, to ensure public trust and transparency, the content and audiences of any ads paid for by public money should be published centrally as a matter of course?

Sir Alan Duncan: The Foreign Office funding for the Integrity Initiative does not really pay for advertisements, so that is not really relevant to today’s urgent question. May I just refer to the earlier question regarding when we knew about the hack? We first knew about it on 23 November.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Lab): The Minister is burying his head in the sand. The fact is that this organisation has received more than £2 million of public money in just over 18 months, and it is a matter of fact that it has been engaging in a smear campaign against the Leader of the Opposition and the Labour party. It has also taken credit for derailing the appointment of Pedro Banos as the director of Homeland Security in Spain. This is a democratic outrage, and will the Minister therefore agree to an independent inquiry into the activities of this organisation?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have said this on many occasions this morning: what the hon. Gentleman says about domestic activity—smearing the Leader of the Opposition—is utterly untrue.
Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): Will the Minister now make it clear when he knew, how long the institute was hacked and what he has done about it?

Sir Alan Duncan: I have sort of answered all those questions already this morning. I first knew about this when there was a report in the Sunday papers. I answered a question sprung on me on the “Today” programme at 7 o’clock yesterday, after which I sought all the facts, which have equipped me truthfully to answer this urgent question today.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Does it not concern the Minister that the internal checks within the FCO have led it to sending cheques for £2 million to a derelict mill in Scotland as an address for this charity?

Sir Alan Duncan: Well, that is not the cleverest of questions. The charity was incorporated in Scotland. Most of its activities are in the UK and all payments are channelled properly to where they belong.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister tell us a bit more about the Foreign Office’s counter-disinformation and media development team—what its objectives, resourcing and budget are and whether it has operational interface with the integrity initiative?

Sir Alan Duncan: This question this morning is primarily about the integrity initiative. We carry out a lot of activity. Indeed, it is linked with our cyber-facilities in the UK Government, so, across Whitehall, there is all sorts of counter-disinformation activities. This is managed by our strategic fund—the conflict, stability and security fund—so increasingly across Whitehall, we are having to be alert and equipped to counter cyber-attacks and disinformation.

Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Lab): The Government should be doing much more to counter Russian disinformation in Britain and in the west. In particular, may I ask the Minister to comment on the activities of RT, which cannot be regarded as a serious news organisation? It is a wholly owned Kremlin propaganda channel, which has engaged in dishonest campaigns to undermine our democracy. Does he agree that it is a channel that mainstream politicians should not have anything to do with, and will he contact his counterparts at DCMS and ask them to encourage Ofcom to review the channel’s licence?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is a rare moment of early festive good cheer that I can find myself wholly in agreement with the hon. Gentleman, which is not something that always happens across the Floor of the House. He is absolutely right about the extent to which Russia Today is an obvious mouthpiece for the Kremlin. It distorts information; it spreads disinformation; and it has quite a few useful idiots who it puts in front of the camera, and we should identify those so-called useful idiots and make sure that none of them is ever in our midst.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I agree with the shadow Foreign Secretary that we should scrutinise all instances of public bodies in receipt of public funds, yet the fact remains that the integrity initiative has criticised all political parties, including my own, when they have fallen foul—inadvertently or not—of the Russian disinformation narrative trap. I am a wee bit concerned that we fall into a trap where we are exposing the plethora of, some would say, Putin-Verstehers in grey suits in all political parties. I understand that the origin of much of the information discussed today emerged as a result of a hack perpetrated by actors of a dubious origin. Will the Minister enlighten the House further on the circumstances of that hack, and will he bring a report back to the Floor of the House?

Sir Alan Duncan: Obviously, when I referred to my “Today” programme interview, it was on Monday, rather than yesterday. Let me just say to the hon. Gentleman that we are having an investigation into the hacking. It is continuing. We cannot attribute it with certainty to an absolutely specific source, but it does fit in with the wider pattern that I mentioned earlier, and therefore, of course, we have our well-founded suspicions.
Points of Order

1.14 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The wait is over. A few days ago, a senior Labour Member of Parliament addressed a public meeting in my constituency relating to the relocation of a post office—a very sensitive public matter. I will not name the MP in question, but I would like your guidance please, Sir, on the correct procedure for Members in terms of when they should or should not show the courtesy of letting a sitting Member of Parliament know.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The answer is straightforward: it is a long-standing convention in this House that a Member visiting the constituency of another Member in a political or public capacity should notify the Member whose constituency is to be visited. If the visit is of a purely private character, for example, going to lunch or dinner at somebody’s house in that Member’s constituency, the obligation does not apply. I am bound to say to him, and I am sorry that he is obviously highly dissatisfied about this, that this is a recurrent complaint from Members on both sides of the House and I hope that, in the interests of the House as a whole, Members on both sides would honour the convention. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Bolsover (Mr Skinner) says from a sedentary position, “Who was it?” Well, the hon. Member for Solihull (Julian Knight) has not named the Member. I think that he is focused on the principle rather than the personality. It seems to me that the principle applies regardless of who the personality is. However, if the hon. Member for Bolsover is particularly keen to know the identity of the person concerned, he can always have a cup of tea with the hon. Gentleman, although he may think that that is a step too far.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): A big step too far.

Mr Speaker: Why is that response not a great surprise to me?

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am saving up the Front Bench. It would be a pity to squander the hon. Gentleman at too early a stage of our proceedings.

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You may remember that an independent report into the allegations of sexual harassment, abuse of power and bullying at UNAids, which Britain currently chairs, has recently been published calling for the resignation of the current executive director. Can you think of any way in which it would be possible to elicit a statement from the Secretary of State for International Development, whose responsibility this is, on what she and the Government are doing to effect the resignation of the said executive director?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman could seek an Adjournment debate on the matter. There are other routes open to him and I think that he knows that. I cannot offer any promise to him but, if he were able to demonstrate that it was a matter of urgency, it could be aired on the Floor of the House. Sometimes, when I am asked by a disappointed or, dare I say it, a mildly frustrated Member who has not been able to air the matter of concern to him or her, my advice tends to be: persist, persist, persist. Just because a Member is unsuccessful the first time round, it does not automatically follow that the Member will continue to fail.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have raised this matter with you and the Clerks, and I understand that measures are being taken to address this issue, but I want to raise with you the concern that there are hundreds of young people here today campaigning for a people’s vote from the For Our Future’s Sake organisation and Our Future Our Choice. They have been in the House to meet MPs over the past few weeks and have had very constructive discussions. They are not protesters. They are not here to cause disruption; they are here to speak to their elected representatives. Can you ensure that they are being allowed in to meet MPs and to use the Committee Rooms that they have booked with Members and that this does not happen in the future? It sends out a very bad message if, for whatever untoward reasons, young people coming to express their democratic rights are prevented from accessing Central Lobby and speaking to their Members.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point of order and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me advance notice of his intention to do so. My reply is a nuanced one that I hope is fair in the circumstances, and those circumstances include the fact that I have been in the Chair and not able to view the circumstances directly, so I am reluctant to rush to judgment.

What I would say to the hon. Gentleman is as follows. If constituents have meetings with their Members, they should of course be given ready access to those Members and should also be permitted to get to a Committee Room with maximum expedition. Security and logistical concerns may mean that larger groups are filtered through Central Lobby in batches so that they can obtain the relevant green card. However, I will investigate the circumstances of what happened this morning more fully and write to him when I have full information.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman, whose point of order is very reasonable, will understand if I say two things. First, I share his insistence on ready access and his passion for the idea of public engagement—in particular, the idea that young people who want to get into this place and communicate with Members, and register their views, should have the opportunity to do so. It is not for nothing that I have chaired the UK Youth Parliament for the past 10 years here, and not for nothing that I have gone to the UK Youth Parliament’s annual conference every year for the past 10 years. That is not just because I enjoy talking to them, though I readily admit that I do, but also because I enjoy hearing from them. That, I think, is important.

The second point I would make, which I hope the hon. Gentleman will accept in the spirit in which it is intended, is that I know that our staff are utterly
dedicated and conscientious, and I would not want to criticise those staff unless there were a very compelling reason to do so.

I take on board what the hon. Gentleman has said, and I will look into it and get back to him.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is customary for the local government finance settlement to be announced to Parliament in early December. Indeed, Ministers had pencilled it in for 6 December. Last week, in a written statement, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government deferred the statement until after the “protected period”, by which I assume he meant the expected meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement, which of course should have been last night.

Have you, Sir, had any indication from the Government as to when they expect to bring the statement before the House, as given the late change to this week’s business, it could have been made by now? I am not asking you to speculate on rumour and uncertainty, with the Government perhaps wanting to collapse business next week. However, this is crucially important, notwithstanding the psychodrama unfolding on the Government Benches, because our councils are now entering the council tax-setting cycle and need to have certainty about their budgets and their council tax requirements, including the police precept, ahead of the bills being sent out in March.

Mr Speaker: I say to the hon. Gentleman, in all candour and conviviality, that no one could accuse him of excluding from his attempted point of order any point that might to any degree, in any way, be judged to be material. That is my polite way of saying that his point of order is supremely comprehensive.

My answer to the hon. Gentleman is twofold. First, the business question is the obvious opportunity for this matter to be aired and, as he is sitting next to the shadow Leader of the House, he can attempt to add it to the list of important matters that she will feel inclined to raise at the business question tomorrow.

Secondly, although I obviously have absolutely no way of knowing whether the contents of the prospective statement are likely to be finalised any time soon, if they are finalised soon, there is no shortage of time for this matter to be aired either tomorrow or, indeed, next week. The hon. Gentleman is dextrous in his use of parliamentary mechanisms to secure the attention of the House. We will leave it there for now.

If there are no further points of order—if the appetite for connected purposes.

International Trade and Development Agency

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

1.24 pm

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish an International Trade and Development Agency to coordinate the development and delivery of policy between the Department for International Trade and the Department for International Development; and for connected purposes.

I am sure that all Members of this House will be familiar with the old adage, “Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and feed him for life.” But I feel that another line should be added to that: “Buy that man’s surplus fish and watch him lift himself out of poverty.”

In March 2016, I went to Sierra Leone, the country of my mother’s birth, to see the impact that UK aid has had. Sierra Leone is a country that was ravaged by civil war—a civil war that was ultimately brought to a close because of the involvement of British armed forces. More recently, Sierra Leone was hit by Ebola, a disease that was able to take hold because the social and medical infrastructure of the country was smashed during the civil war. British aid and British medical professionals were instrumental in winning the fight against Ebola. When mudslides in Sierra Leone’s capital of Freetown took the lives of hundreds, UK aid stepped up and supported the country once again.

However, when I spoke to the people of Sierra Leone—a country that was hit by war, disease and natural disaster—on my visit, I found that the thing they craved most from their relationship with the UK was not further aid, thankful though they were for the aid they had received, but increased trade. They wanted to be able to sell to us and to be able to buy our products and services in return.

The Department for International Development has the remit to end extreme poverty and tackle the root causes of disease, mass migration, insecurity and conflict. I know that DIFD does look at helping countries on the journey out of poverty by supporting the development of their commercial potential and establishing the foundations for future trading relationships, but it will always feel pressure to focus on countries with the most poverty and at the times of greatest hardship. Our constituents very rarely complain when they see UK aid supporting those in the most extreme hardship. We are, at heart, a nation of people with an internationalist outlook and a desire to support people when they are at their lowest ebb. There is, however, less vocal support for our development spending when it is not targeted at the points of most extreme poverty and hardship. Yet it is this area that gives countries the best chance of becoming permanently economically self-sufficient.

Since the EU referendum vote, the people of the United Kingdom have embraced a new-found interest in international trade policy. We have seen a significant appetite to build on our current relationships and become, once again, a global trading nation. It is right that in the immediate post-Brexit world, the International Trade Department prioritises increasing trade flows between the UK and other larger developed economies. This is
the most efficient use of limited Government resources: time, money, and people. But there is a danger that countries who are neither at the poorest nor the richest end of the spectrum fall between the two. We see very little public disagreement when our aid spending is directed at countries like Sierra Leone, which has gone through such difficulties, but when it is directed at countries like Nigeria and Pakistan, we too often see negative headlines and public disquiet. Yet it is countries like these—not at the lowest ebb but certainly not yet fully economically stable—that could be permanently helped out of poverty through trade with the United Kingdom.

If the UK is going to take up its rightful position as a truly global leader in this field, we need to ensure that we have a repository for the kind of expertise necessary to look into things like trade preferences for least developed countries and how we make sure that countries growing out of LDC status are not presented with a cliff-edge change to their trade status.

Addressing those complexities is a tall order for our civil servants, spread across two Departments, and takes deep, specialist expertise. Civil servants rotate through different jobs across Departments every few years, so we often have to rely on outside expertise, and unfortunately there is little institutional memory in this area. Equally, asking civil servants to assess the impact of policies and programmes they have designed is like asking someone to mark their own homework. Parliament must also be able to access independent evidence and analysis, be well informed about the shape of our new trade arrangements with developing countries as we leave the EU, have visibility of the impacts of those trade arrangements and, if they are performing less well than expected, call for improvements.

A similar basket of requirements brought about the creation of the United States International Trade Commission some 100 years ago. That is why we should have a similar but enhanced organisation here in the UK at this pivotal moment in our history. The agency would be a statutory body, reporting to Ministers and Parliament, probably with a staff of around 50 full-time professionals. The agency would have five main functions.

First, it would carry out analysis and consultations with businesses in the UK and in developing countries to build up a robust evidence base, monitoring our trade with developing countries and assessing the impacts on growth, employment and development, reporting to Ministers and Parliament annually.

Secondly, it would specifically review the scope and design of our trade preference systems for developing countries and advise Ministers at least every two years on how these were performing and where improvements were needed, including which countries should be included, excluded or graduated.

Thirdly, it would recommend how we can best craft our future trade agreements with developing countries in goods, services and technology to maximise the benefits for promoting shared prosperity at home and abroad and overcome red-tape barriers for developing countries exporting to the UK.

Fourthly, it would undertake sustainability impact assessments of all future UK trade agreements with developing countries, following the model that has been used extensively by the EU but for which we currently have no system here in the UK.

Finally, the agency would track our Aid for Trade programmes, assessing performance against Government targets and recommending best practices for joined-up and effective UK aid spending in this area.

We have the opportunity to create an organisation of truly global standing that could be a model for other OECD countries and an international centre of excellence. We have the chance to make a statement to countries around the world, rich and poor, that we do not just want to make poverty bearable; we want to make poverty history.

1.32 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to speak in opposition to the Bill. Let me start by making it clear that trade, development and ending poverty very much go together. That has always been at the heart of the Department for International Development’s agenda, having been put at its heart when the Department was established by the Labour Government in 1997. I sat in that Department as an adviser and worked with many organisations, particularly on trade and development issues, for many years. I worked alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), who served as a joint Trade and DFID Minister, on how we properly put those issues together.

I am a Labour and a Co-operative MP. Fair trade and trade justice are at the heart of what Co-operative MPs stand for. Many of us are members of the fair trade group in Parliament, and many of us have argued for support for trade with developing countries—trade that will lift people out of poverty.

The hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) mentioned the Make Poverty History campaign, in which I was closely involved in 2005. One of its three pillars was trade justice, alongside more and better aid and dropping the debt. All those things go together. While I agree with some of the principles put forward by the hon. Gentleman, his speech belied a wider agenda. This is essentially part of an agenda about Brexit and an attempt by some Government Members to undermine and take apart the Department for International Development by other means than a straight-out abolition. That has been a hallmark of some Conservative policy over the last few years, which is deeply disappointing. While we have, on the face of it, a commitment to the Department and to the 0.7% spending target, a series of measures have undermined the Department and its core objectives.

I am not sure that some of the things the hon. Gentleman suggested would be compatible with the International Development Acts. Those Acts were clear that poverty eradication had to be the foremost agenda of UK aid and development policy. He said that the Department feels “pressure” to focus on countries with the most poverty. I think that it should. That should be the primary purpose of our aid and development spending—those most in poverty.

James Cleverly: Not exclusively.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman says that I was not listening. I was listening carefully. He is blurring objectives. The focus should be on poverty and on our
common interest. There is a way of deising international development policy and trade policy that is in the common interest of both parties—of our country and of developing countries—and ensures that we move together in generating and spreading wealth and prosperity for all people in the world, including in those countries, rather than having a self-interested trade policy.

Past Conservative Governments do not have a positive record on this. I would hate to see a day when we slip back to things like the Pergau Dam scandal, or where things are tied simply to self-interested trade policies and we attempt to get self-advantage rather than to focus on common interests between ourselves and some of the poorest countries in the world.

There is a good way to go about this. It is the policy that we have practised in Government through the Department for International Development. It is the policy that has been pursued in much of our work through multilateral agencies, which do much to promote trade and development and provide trade capacity.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the EU. One of the greatest tragedies of Brexit is that we are potentially coming out of key European development agencies, the European development fund and the arrangements that exist for close co-operation with many countries, including many in the Commonwealth and African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. It has been far from perfect. I have campaigned when I think the EU has got things wrong in its relationships. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West will remember he and I having lively discussions about policy in a previous life and where that went.

The reality is that, on the whole, the EU has had development and poverty eradication at the heart of its policies and its relationships with the ACP countries. We already have trade agreements with many of those countries. We already have supportive policies in aid and development. One of the tragedies of Brexit is that we will potentially just chuck all that in the bin.

The European development fund, the European Commission’s humanitarian office—ECHO—and many other programmes are some of the Department for International Development’s highest rated multilateral programmes. I previously served on the International Development Committee, and we saw evidence of that when looking at the funding of multilateral agencies.

It seems absurd to suggest that we come out of all those programmes and create something else that is hugely bureaucratic and would, I fear—whatever the intentions of the hon. Member for Braintree—be used by other Government Members and those with agendas to simply undermine the work of the Department for International Development.

There is also the crucial issue of the extra bureaucracy and cost of setting up such an agency. Why do we need it? We already have a Department. We already have UK aid. We already have the multilateral agencies that have these relationships. We already have many experts working in trade facilitation and trade and international development. Why would we create another costly agency and reorganise and shunt civil servants back and forth yet again when we already have people doing excellent work in that area, in not only this country but many of the others with which we co-operate? I do not need to mention all the names, but there are many other agencies that we have worked with for many years, such as Crown Agents.

Of course, we also have the Commonwealth Development Corporation. Mr Speaker, you will know, because I have spoken on this at great length before, that I have been a critical friend of the CDC. The CDC has got things wrong in the past. The huge extra funding given to it was premature and too much to absorb quickly, but I know that the CDC is working to look at all those issues. It is important that we stick with what we have. It works perfectly well. It has poverty eradication at the heart of it. We have excellent people working on it. We do not need to create something else.

As I said, this Bill unfortunately sits alongside a series of other agendas. We have seen attempts by this Government to re-badge aid and development spending and redraw the definitions used at an international and UK level—“Let’s say we’re keeping the 0.7% target, but we’ll undermine it in every way we can by sticking everything else under it and claiming that it’s development spending.” We have seen the repeated diversion of our aid funding to private contractors, many of whom have actually been seriously criticised for some of the work they have been doing. As I have said, we have had the huge increases to the CDC. I am not opposed to an increase to the CDC, but I have had some serious concerns about its level.

We have also seen this with the Government’s two cross-Government funds—the conflict, stability and security fund and the prosperity fund. Many parts of that work are excellent—the funds are doing excellent work—and we cannot have a purist development policy in which we do not work with other agencies. However, I certainly have some serious questions about the way in which other Departments have been spending money through the prosperity fund without reference to our development objectives and without reference to poverty eradication as the first point. Quite frankly, there has been very lax scrutiny from other Departments—including, I am sorry to say, the Foreign Office—about where that is going and how it is being spent.

I do not think that the fate of the world’s poorest people and the relationships of common interest that we should be building together, as I have said, should somehow be used instrumentally in the Brexit process. They should not be used as some sort of Brexit sweeteners for us to try and grab magical trade deals that, frankly, we already have, but are also not going to replace our excellent trading relations with our EU neighbours or, indeed, the trading relations that exist between us as an integral part of the European Union and many of the world’s developing countries.

We have to have a relationship of mutual respect: not simply one of self-interest, but one of common interest. We will truly make poverty history by supporting and working alongside developing countries, not by acting in an instrumental way in which we are putting our own interests before those of others. I therefore oppose the Bill, and I hope the House will divide on this.

Question put (Standing Order No. 23).

The House divided: Ayes 42, Noes 243.
Division No. 278]  

AYES  

Crausby, Sir David  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, Julie  
Coaker, Vernon  
Chapman, Jenny  
Champion, Sarah  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Carden, Dan  
Crouch, Tracey  
Double, Steve  
Duddridge, James  
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain  
Elphicke, Charlie  
Evennett, rh Sir David  
Ferguson, Mr Thomas  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Burn, rh Hilary  
Bailey, Mr Adrian  
Barron, rh Mr Kevin  
Beckett, rh Margaret  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Berger, Luciana  
Bells, Mr Clive  
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta  
Blomfield, Paul  
Brabin, Tracy  
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben  
Braze, rh Tom  
Brennan, Kevin  
Brown, Lyn  
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas  
Bryant, Chris  
Buck, Ms Karen  
Burden, Richard  
Burgon, Richard  
Butler, Dawn  
Cable, rh Sir Vince  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Cameron, Dr Lisa  
Campbell, rh Mr Alan  
Campbell, Mr Ronnie  
Carson, Dan  
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
Charney, Jenny  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Cocker, Vernon  
Cooper, Julie  
Cooper, rh Yvette  
Corbyn, rh Jeremy  
Crausby, Sir David  

Glindon, Mary  
Goodman, Helen  
Grady, Patrick  
Green, Kate  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Greenwood, Margaret  
Griffith, Nia  
Grogan, John  
Gwynne, Andrew  
Haigh, Louise  
Hanson, rh David  
Hardy, Emma  
Harman, rh Ms Harriet  
Hayes, Carolyn  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayman, Sue  
Hendrick, Sir Mark  
Hendry, Drew  

Morrison, Dr Andrew  
Offord, Dr Matthew  
Penning, rh Sir Mike  
Quince, Will  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Robinson, Mary  
Selous, Andrew  
Smith, Royston  
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Syms, Sir Robert  
Thomas, Derek  
Thomson, Ross  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward  
Vickers, Martin  
Villiers, rh Theresa  
Wiggin, Bill  
Wragg, Mr William  

Tellers for the Ayes:  
Robert Neill and Colin Clark  

NOES  

Abbott, rh Ms Diane  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  
Amessbury, Mike  
Antoniazzi, Tonia  
Ashworth, Jonathan  
Austin, Ian  
Ashworth, Jonathan  

Creagh, Mary  
Cryer, John  
Cummings, Judith  
Cunningham, Alex  
Cunningham, Mr Jim  
Daby, Janet  
Dakin, Nic  
Davey, rh Sir Edward  
David, Wayne  
Davies, Geraint  
De Cordova, Marsha  
De Piero, Gloria  
Debono, Thangam  
Dent Coad, Emma  
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Drew, rh Dr David  
Dromey, Jack  
Duffield, Rosie  
Eagle, rh Ms Angela  
Eagle, Maria  
Edwards, Jonathan  
Efford, Clive  
Elliott, Julie  
Elmore, Chris  
Esterson, Bill  
Evans, Chris  
Farrelly, Paul  
Fellows, Marion  
Field, rh Frank  
Fitzpatrick, Jim  
Fletcher, Colleen  
Fovargue, Yvonne  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Frisby, James  
Furniss, Gill  
Gaffney, Hugh  
Gapes, Mike  
Gardiner, Barry  
George, Ruth  
Gethins, Stephen  
Gill, Preet Kaur  

McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
McKinnell, Catherine  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorran, Anna  
Mearns, Ian  
Miliband, rh Edward  
Monaghan, Carol  
Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
Moran, Layla  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Graham  
Murray, Ian  
Norris, Alex  
Onn, Melanie  
Owusu, Chi  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Perkins, Toby  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillipson, Bridget  
Pindock, Laura  
Pollard, Luke  
Poulter, Dr Dan  
Pound, Stephen  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rashid, Faisal  
Rayner, Angela  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emma  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Rowley, Danielle  
Ruane, Chris  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Ryan, rh Joan  
Saville Roberts, Liz  
Shah, Naz  
Sharma, Mr Virendra  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiqi, Tulip  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Slaughter, Andy  

Smee, Ruth  
Smith, Angela  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Nick  
Smelt, Kari  
Snell, Gareth  
Sobel, Alex  
Spellar, rh John  
Stevens, Jo  
Stone, Jamie  
Streeting, Wes  
Stringer, Graham  
Sweeney, Mr Paul  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Trickett, Jon  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Stephen
Mr Speaker: I am not quite sure which football team the hon. Gentleman supports—

James Cleverly: Arsenal.

Mr Speaker: Well, in that case the hon. Gentleman is always a model of good behaviour—always. Any Arsenal fan is to be commended. We appreciate the amiable demeanour of the hon. Gentleman in the circumstances.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wonder whether I might seek your advice on this matter. The Home Office has just laid a written statement on an update of the Government’s anti-corruption strategy 2017 to 2022, which originated from David Cameron back in 2016. I have been unable to get a hard copy of it, but having this as a written, not an oral, statement denies Members of the House the opportunity to hold the Government to account on the commitments in the strategy. We are at least due by now a consultation on the new economic crime of failure to prevent money laundering—I asked the Prime Minister about that in her statement on the G20 the other day. I know that these are good days to bury bad news and that this Government like to duck big challenges, but have you received any advance notice or indication of when there will be an oral statement from the Minister with responsibility for crime prevention on the anti-corruption strategy, which would give us in this House an opportunity to debate its progress?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Lady is that no, I have received no indication of an imminent statement on that matter by any Government Minister. This is not, strictly speaking, a point of order upon which I can rule, although I must say that in raising an attempted point of order that does not constitute a point of order, she is not in a notably isolated minority—that is to say, the vast majority of attempted points of order are, of course, nothing of the kind. They are points of frustration, points of point-scoring, points of view and points of advertisement, rather than points of order. What I would say is that it is of course for the Government to decide whether, and if so when, to make a statement on the matter and to judge what form that statement should take. Principally—I say this as much for the benefit of people attending to our proceedings who are not Members of the House as for those who are—they have to make a judgment about whether to make a written or an oral statement. That partly depends on the timetable and how much space there is in the day, and it partly depends on their judgment about the level of importance to be attached to the matter.

The hon. Lady has made clear her view that an oral statement would have been appropriate in this case, and no doubt that view will have been heard clearly on the Treasury Bench. Meanwhile, although she is disappointed not to have witnessed a statement that she thinks is appropriate, she has at least succeeded in highlighting the fact of the imminent publication—well, we think the imminent publication, but certainly the important publication—of the document concerned.

If there are no further points of order, the Clerk will now proceed to read the orders of the day.
Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill [Lords]

Consideration of the Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

Mr Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected the amendments on the amendment paper—although they are starred as tabled after the usual deadline—because of the late notice of today's business. I should also inform the House that I have today issued a provisional certificate that clause 2 of the Bill, as amended in Public Bill Committee, relates exclusively to England and Wales and is within devolved legislative competence. At the end of the Report stage on a Bill, I am required to consider the Bill as amended on Report for certification. At that point, I will issue my final certificate.

Clause 3

Authorised Court and Tribunal Staff: Legal Advice and Judicial Functions

1.58 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I beg to move amendment 1, in page 3, line 28, leave out subsection 3 and insert—

“(3) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before Parliament and approved by a resolution of each House.”

This amendment would require that where statutory instruments delegating judicial functions to authorised persons are brought they would be subject to the affirmative procedure.

Mr Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Amendment 2, in the schedule, page 6, line 36, at end insert—

“(aa) is a qualified solicitor, barrister or chartered legal executive with more than three years’ experience post-qualification, and”.

This amendment would stipulate that the minimum legal qualifications for authorised persons should be three years’ experience post-qualification.

Amendment 3, in the schedule, page 8, line 31, at end insert—

“( ) is a qualified solicitor, barrister or chartered legal executive with more than three years’ experience post-qualification, and”. See explanatory statement to amendment 2.

Amendment 4, in the schedule, page 11, line 12, at end insert—

“and if they are a qualified solicitor, barrister or chartered legal executive with more than three years’ experience post-qualification”. See explanatory statement to amendment 2.

Amendment 5, in the schedule, page 11, line 32, leave out subsection 67C and insert—

“67C Right to judicial reconsideration of decision made by an authorised person

A party to any decision made by an authorised person in the execution of the person’s duty as an authorised person exercising a relevant judicial function, by virtue of section 67B(1), may apply in writing, within 14 days of the service of the order, to have the decision reconsidered by a judge of the relevant court within 14 days from the date of application.”

This amendment would grant people subject to a decision made under delegated powers a statutory right to judicial reconsideration.

Yasmin Qureshi: I rise to speak in support of amendment 1 and the other amendments. We are being encouraged to wave through this wafer-thin Bill, which is both narrowly constrained and obscurely drafted. This is a Bill that sneaks through changes that will change unconstitutional double delegation—that is, of legislative power to unaccountable judges sitting on procedure rule committees and of judicial powers to non-independent courts and tribunal staff.

Let us begin with clause 3, which delegates judicial functions to authorised staff. This provision must be understood in the context of a wider court reform agenda and the austerity measures that seek to make significant cuts. These efficiencies, generated through the proposed reforms, arise not only from the reduction in the size of the courts estate, but from savings on judicial salaries. Ultimately, the Bill seeks more justice on the cheap.

The Bill will ensure that judicial powers are delegated to non-independent courts and tribunal staff. The procedure rule committee is primarily made up of senior judges, who would ensure relatively little external public scrutiny of this delegation of judicial functions to non-judicial employees of Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service. That is a really important point.

The Bill provides that regulations under clause 3 must be made under the negative resolution procedure. In effect, this will allow new rules of court stipulating which judicial functions can be delegated and to whom, and the requisite qualifications or experience that an authorised person must have to take on these judicial functions, but, as the Bill stands, such a delegation will come into force without any real parliamentary scrutiny. In essence, by providing that the regulations in the Bill are to be made under the negative resolution procedure, the Government are avoiding proper scrutiny by a democratically mandated legislature here in this place.

Our amendment, which is supported by the Bar Council, would ensure more constitutionally appropriate accountability and scrutiny, through the affirmative resolution procedure, of these sweeping regulations. These regulations concern powers to make rules stipulating which judicial functions can be delegated and to whom, and the qualifications and experience required before a member of the administration can be given these judicial functions. Without careful scrutiny and additional safeguards, the Government’s drip-feed approach to court reform will erode some of our most fundamental institutions and our understanding of the rule of law.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Will the hon. Lady comment on whether the qualification provision will raise the bar significantly above that in current regulations for such people and whether that will put at a disadvantage people already carrying out those functions?

Yasmin Qureshi: We are talking about two different things. The authorised persons are to have delegated to them many judicial functions, and it is only appropriate that they have some experience. In those circumstances, three years’ post-qualification experience is not a big ask, obligation or burden. We are asking for the minimum, and we are being very reasonable and practical about it. We are only surprised that the Government are not taking our concerns on board and changing the rules.
Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): One reason we need proper scrutiny is the tendency towards rationalisation of the courts, which eventually means long waiting times—that cannot be justice for anyone waiting for a trial. There have been endless cases of this now, and it is getting worse, not better. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is not fair on the victim or the perpetrator?

Yasmin Qureshi: My hon. Friend is spot on. That is one of our concerns about the Government’s proposals.

We need a process that requires transparent and public scrutiny in this House of the scope of future delegated powers. The safeguards the Opposition seek on the powers created by the Bill are not unreasonable and would not interfere with the notion of reasonable delegation of non-contentious administrative functions; they simply press for further oversight and accountability.

Our amendments providing that the authorised persons must be solicitors, barristers or chartered legal executives with more than three years’ post-qualification experience have been recommended and drafted by the Law Society and are supported by the Bar Council. In other words, all the practitioners in the country are supporting and asking for these changes, and I ask the Government, even at this late stage, to consider adopting them. In the circumstance, we believe them to be the minimal ask of the Government. It is a lower qualification threshold than what is currently required of pupil supervisors, or indeed of solicitors, to supervise an office.

It is worth remembering that authorised staff are not subject to the training, experience, ethos and oaths of professional judges, and could be performing judicial functions while also—this is really important—being employed directly by HMCTS. This raises genuine questions of independence.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): We are talking about taxpayers’ money. Does the hon. Lady not accept that where such tasks are routine—say, straightforward case preparation—the people performing them should not need a legal qualification?

Yasmin Qureshi: These people will be performing judicial tasks and functions and so will need to be appropriately qualified, which is why we have tabled the amendments.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is my understanding that these are mainly interlocutory functions, not actual judgments or significant judicial functions.

Yasmin Qureshi: No, as we understand it, although it is envisaged that some of these tasks will be procedural, others will be very important to people whose rights are affected. We might think, for example, that requests for adjournments are straightforward, but they are not. As practitioners and former practitioners will know, they can be complicated, because when a judge decides whether to grant one, they take into consideration a host of things, so it is important that the person be appropriately qualified.

We accept that the procedure rule committee will be able to iron out some of the questions about what are judicial and what are administrative functions, but the main thing is that these people will be carrying out judicial functions and deciding some difficult issues, and it is only appropriate that they be qualified and appropriately experienced.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We discussed this in Committee. Interlocutory case management often has a large bearing on what happens in a case; it can alter what happens in a case and it can alter cost decisions. In their own way, such decisions are as important as purely judicial decisions. The Government’s proposal might be a false economy, so I support what she is saying.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank my hon. Friend, a former shadow Justice Minister, for his intervention, and I take his point.

We acknowledge that the relevant procedure rule committee will set out the procedural requirements for who can carry out the procedures, but we also know that these committees are predominantly made up of senior judges, so this will have implications for the independence of judicial decision making.

We also believe that such a shift will not match the expectations held by members of the public on the experience and independence of those making judicial decisions about their rights.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The hon. Lady referred to the independence of the judges. Is not the whole virtue of this proposal that the rules governing who should be delegated what functions will be made by judges, and should not be made by politicians in any circumstance? Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, the former Lord Chief Justice, observed:

“Experience has shown that detailed restrictions on procedure are a very real fetter on the administration of justice.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 2039.]

He counselled against too much restriction of the kind that is being proposed.

Yasmin Qureshi: The procedure rule committee obviously has a place in our judicial system, and we accept that judges and others are involved in it, but everyone knows that there are times when, because of financial pressures, services are cut to the bare minimum. We believe that, to protect our judicial system, the functions concerned should be clearly set out, and those that will have an effect on someone should be decided by an authorised person with a legal qualification.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The hon. Lady is getting perilously close to suggesting that judges will do justice when they are inside a court, but will be incapable of ensuring that justice is done when they are outside a court, on the procedure rule committees. Will she make it crystal clear that judges will always, in all circumstances, want to do justice, and can be trusted to do so?

Yasmin Qureshi: We are not suggesting that judges will somehow not be independent. As I have said, I have the highest regard for our judiciary in court, although from time to time we might disagree with the decisions that judges reach. In the real world, however, there are often targets to be met and financial constraints to be considered. We are saying that when the procedure rule committee is making rules, it should be guided by Parliament.

Robert Neill rose—
Yasmin Qureshi: I have taken a number of interventions, and I will make some progress now. Otherwise we will be going round in circles on the same point.

The Bill provides for judicial functions to be delegated to authorised staff across the criminal, civil and family courts and tribunals. However, it also states that while those staff will be independent of the Lord Chancellor when carrying out the delegated functions, they will remain court staff, and will not take the judicial oath of independence. It is surely important for those who will be making any type of judicial decision to take that oath. They cannot be described as independent when they are employed by the court in which they will serve.

There might, for example, be economic pressures. The court might want to get rid of cases very quickly, within a certain period. The promotion prospects of those who are employed directly by the courts will, of course, be affected, and, unlike judges, they will not be governed by the oath of independence, the Bar rules and the Law Society rules. People who are making judicial decisions should be appropriately qualified, with the proper ethos and the proper rules that apply to solicitors and barristers, and to which members of the legal profession, such as me, must have regard.

Our amendment 5 would ensure that a party to any decision made by an authorised person exercising a relevant judicial function, or the function of a tribunal, “may apply in writing, within 14 days of the service of the order, to have the decision reconsidered by a judge of the relevant court within 14 days from the date of application.”

We will be quite happy if the Government want to increase the period to 21 days, or reduce it to fewer than 14, but we want people to have a right to judicial reconsideration of a decision made by an authorised person. We cannot understand why the Government do not want to accept the amendment.

2.15 pm

The statutory right of reconsideration would allow any party to a decision made by an authorised person to have that decision reconsidered by a judge, as recommended by Lord Justice Briggs in his 2016 “Civil Courts Structure Review: Final Report”. The right is already provided for in, for example, tribunal procedure rules. Lord Justice Briggs said:

“The creation of an extensive right to have the decisions of Case Officers considered by a judge has from the outset been regarded as the delegation of judicial functions to persons who are not judges”.

We are asking for a minimum safeguard. The right of reconsideration would have the benefit of freeing an authorised person from the obligation to produce detailed reasons for every decision, as would be the case if the right of appeal, for example, were created. It has the additional benefit of going further than a right of review by guaranteeing judicial oversight of a decision.

More importantly, that statutory right would ensure compliance with article 6 of the European convention on human rights, which refers to the right to a fair trial. Decisions that affect people’s rights must be made by an independent and impartial person, and that person cannot be a member of court staff or employed directly by a tribunal. We consider this to be a proportionate safeguard that would be relevant to the new powers created by the Bill, given the provision in article 6 that the determination of a person’s civil rights and obligations, or any criminal charge against them, must be undertaken by an independent and impartial tribunal established by law.

The requirement for independence would apply not only to the tribunal, but to any judge or other officer authorised by law to exercise judicial power. As the Ministry of Justice acknowledges in its human rights memorandum on the Bill, “In considering independence... guarantees against outside pressures are relevant—as is the question whether the body presents an appearance of independence”.

In the memorandum, the MOJ suggests that it is intended that “case management decisions which it is proposed these authorised members of staff will be able to take will be uncontentious and not of sufficient importance to engage Article 6”.

However—I say this particularly to those who have practised in law and have attended court, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith (Andy Slaughter) made the point earlier—case management decisions can have a significant impact in shaping the ultimate outcome of a case. For example, a decision on the appropriate timescales within which a party should take a step in proceedings may be significant, as failures to comply with a timescale will lead to some or all of the party’s case being struck out.

Furthermore, the Ministry of Justice’s factsheet on the delegation of functions to non-judicial staff states: “In future, we expect that authorised staff may be able to carry out a... range of... functions” and responsibilities, “including case management powers and some mediation roles.”

That suggests that what is envisaged is more than a delegation of purely procedural powers to authorised persons. In effect, a mediation role is almost like a judicial role, and people who have not been properly trained and are not properly qualified should not be mediating between the parties to the proceedings. Even in its own paper, the Ministry of Justice seems to expect those staff to play a much bigger role in decision making.

Labour Members strongly believe that Parliament must have a role in ensuring that the new system of delegation proposed in the Bill includes a backstop protection—the word “backstop” has been used a lot in the last few weeks—of the right to a fair trial. Our amendments have been endorsed by the Law Society, the Bar Council and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. They propose a statutory right to judicial reconsideration for any party to a judicial decision made by an authorised person or non-judge. This would afford stronger protection of the right to a fair trial, and would guarantee the independent and impartial determination required by article 6. Another of our amendments seeks to ensure that, in drawing up the rules on reconsideration, the procedure committee must consider which functions and decisions could clearly have a material impact on the substantive rights of the parties.

The safeguards we are calling for are not unreasonable; they are minimal if we understand that the provisions in this so-called “uncontroversial” Bill have the potential to profoundly impact on our justice system. But to truly understand the impact of this Bill, we have to look at it
in the context of the Government’s wider austerity agenda. The double delegation of powers that the Government are intent on introducing is a slippery slope that, without proper controls, puts rights at risk. We can resist this—and we do. Without further careful scrutiny and additional safeguards, this Bill has the potential to erode long-established legal rights.

The Government must take notice of the clear limitations of this Bill. They should listen to those who seek to improve this Bill and accept our amendments to ensure that we protect our judicial system.

Robert Neill: I hope I shall make a better stab at my speech than I did of being a Teller earlier.

I rise to oppose these amendments, tempted though I am by the way in which they were proposed by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), whom I respect as a fellow lawyer. However, I do have to say that she seeks to go further than is appropriate and seeks to put a needless restriction on the ability of the procedure committee in particular to come to the appropriate balance. I have very great respect for the views of both the Law Society and the Bar Council—I say that with reference to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests as a non-practising barrister and a consultant to a law firm—but ultimately the scheme envisaged by the Government is a right and balanced one, and reflects in particular the views of the senior judiciary, which I think is important because ultimately it is the judges who are best placed to decide the appropriate level of delegation. They are the people who work day to day with these staff; they see day to day the nature of the boxwork—as it is sometimes called—and the other things that come in.

For these reasons, when the matter was debated in the other place, both Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd, the recently retired Lord Chief Justice, to whom I have already referred, and Lord Neuberger of Abbotsbury, recently retired president of the Supreme Court, counselled against an undue restriction on the operation of the civil procedure rule committee, already a well-established body of the kind the Opposition seek to bring in. I think they also broadly supported the overall thrust of the Bill.

The hon. Lady referred to austerity. That is not the objective of this Bill; there has been a long-standing proposal to modernise the civil justice system. She referred to the work done by Lord Justice Briggs, for whom I have the greatest respect. The Bill is a logical follow-on from the Briggs report, and it is necessary if we are to achieve modernisation and make the courts more accessible for litigants. This is an entirely sensible Bill; that is why the judiciary has pushed for these sorts of proposals, and why Lord Thomas said that he “warmly” welcomed it. It will save some £6 million; he regards that as a realistic figure. That is important in the context of the available resources for the courts system. We all accept that the courts are under pressure, and this is a sensible way forward that does not impede the basic requirements of access to justice or fairness.

Lord Thomas said two further things that we should bear in mind. He spoke about the developments in civil procedures; the rule committee has been an important part of that over the last 15 to 20 years, so it is not as though the committee were unused to dealing with these matters. The committees bring together representatives of the legal profession. As a former practitioner, I agree with his description of that committee as “a highly representative body with many representatives of the legal profession. Certainly, the committee will always try to reach a view by consensus—when I was a member of it for more than six years there never was a division; we always managed to agree.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 2039.]

Most experienced practitioners will be aware of that. I think we can say the same of the criminal procedure rule committee; these are very well-established bodies, and judges do not forget that they are judges when they are there.

It is a little unworthy, I say with respect, to suggest that the judiciary—we have talked about the senior judiciary chairing these bodies—would acquiesce in an inappropriate level of delegation for a purely financial consideration. They would be going against their judicial oaths. I do not think for one second that the hon. Lady really means to say that they would do that. The amendments would, however, put needless constraint on the committee’s work. That is why I quoted before and quote again Lord Thomas’s observation:

“Experience has shown that detailed restrictions on procedure are a very real fetter on the administration of justice”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 June 2018; Vol. 791, c. 2039.]

In the other place, he gave a number of examples that I need not give here showing why that could be counterproductive.

It is also worth considering the speech of Lord Neuberger. He pointed out the following:

“There are two protected factors: one is that nothing can be done without it being in the rules, and the second is that the Lord Chief Justice needs to give his or her authorisation to the person who makes the decision.” —[Official Report, House of Lords, 20 July 2018; Vol. 792, c. 887.]

Those are important safeguards.

James Cartlidge: My hon. Friend speaks with great expertise. What he is saying goes back to the point raised earlier about the possibility of the functions that are delegated having legal significance. Presumably if that was the case, they would not be delegated to start with.

Robert Neill: That is precisely right. It is inconceivable that any Lord Chief Justice would give his or her consent to a delegation that was inappropriate or would put the interests of justice at risk. I never sat as a deputy district judge—they used to be called deputy registrars in my day, so long ago was it—in civil matters, but I have many friends who do, and a great deal of what is called boxwork, with which at least some on the Treasury Bench will be familiar, was of a very administrative kind. We expect the district judges in a busy county court to deal with that, whereas it seems perfectly reasonable for many of these matters, which are often of a very interlocutory nature, to be dealt with by an experienced member of court staff who has been in the service for many years. We are not talking about the ultimate determination of the case in any of these matters. That is why Lord Neuberger referred to that safeguard or protection, and the protection that that would be laid before Parliament.
Lord Neuberger made another important observation on the attempt, as it seems to me, to fetter the discretion of the committee. He posed a rhetorical question, as perhaps senior judges and other lawyers tend to do:

"Whether it is right to provide in such clear terms, and such uncompromising general terms, for the circumstances and requirements for appeals—which is what he was talking about—seems to him to be questionable. He was making this point:

"Having chaired the Civil Procedure Rule Committee for three years, I can say, as has been quoted in relation to its criminal equivalent by my noble and learned friend Lord Thomas, that considerable care is given to ensure that all the requirements of justice are met. It is very rare, if ever, that I can remember a decision being arrived at which was not arrived at by consensus."

These questions are considered, not only by the judiciary but by practitioners, including members of the solicitors profession and members of the Bar. Plaintiffs' and defendants' interests are represented on these committees, as are the ends of the profession—solicitors and barristers—and all levels of the judiciary, from the High Court bench through the circuit bench to the district bench. This is a broad-based body and, as Lord Neuberger said, these

"details should be worked out...by the rule committee".—[Official Report, House of Lords, 10 July 2018; Vol. 792, c. 890 to 891.]

I think that that is a forceful argument for leaving the proposals as the Government intended.

2.30 pm

This is an important matter, but I hope that the House will not be lured into setting an undue restriction that, with every respect to the intentions of the hon. Member for Bolton South East, could also set an undesirably precedent in which Parliament, courts and tribunals could be the most affected by potential delays in the family courts. Several of my hon. Front-Bench colleagues—I believe that safeguards need to be in place to ensure that people are properly qualified to make decisions and particularly that contentious decisions should be reviewed by a qualified judge. I want explicitly to address concerns about how this might transpire in the family courts. Several of my hon. Friends raised the concern in Committee that the family courts would be the most affected by potential delays and the perversive consequences of the measures in the Bill.

This is particularly relevant given the recent exposure of the case of Sammy Woodhouse. I am sure that colleagues will be well aware of her case. I know that the Minister is, and I am grateful to her for meeting Sammy and me last week. Mr Speaker also welcomed Sammy to Prime Minister's questions last week. Her bravery in putting herself forward, in risking being held in contempt of the family court and in waiving her anonymity to speak about her experiences, so that we in this place can drive change, is inspiring. We owe it to her and to the many other survivors to ensure that we drive change and ensure that what happened to her and to too many other young women and girls never happens again.

Those young women and girls were failed by the state. They were failed by our legal system, by the police, by the Crown Prosecution Service, by local authorities and by government at every level, and now they are being failed yet again by our legal system. Our entire permissive system, which allows anyone to make an application through the family courts, means that men who have been convicted of rape—in Sammy's case, the father of her child, Arshid Hussain, is serving a 35-year prison sentence—can apply to the courts for access or visitation rights. Sammy's case shocked the nation, but unfortunately it was not unique. Just yesterday, I spoke to another woman who had to respond and attend court after the man who was convicted of raping her and fathering her child had applied through the family courts from prison.

This could be prevented through a simple ban on any man convicted of fathering a child through rape applying to the family courts. I know that the Government are reluctant to bring this forward, out of concern for the convicted rapist's article 8 right to a family life, but I am afraid that that simply is not good enough. I will always defend our human rights as enshrined in the Human Rights Act 1998 and the European convention on human rights—I say this on the day of the 70th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights—but article 8 is a qualified right and not one that should override the rights of women and children and their safety. Surely, we should be starting from the presumption that if a child has been conceived through rape, the man should have no parental rights to that child and that we should allow such rights only in exceptional circumstances, not the other way round.

When I speak to victims of rape and survivors of child sexual exploitation in situations such as Sammy's—women who have an almost uniformly terrible experience of the family courts—their feeling is one of betrayal and despair that every day is a battle in which they have to fight for their most basic rights. They are often forced to relive their traumatic experiences and justify themselves over and over, yet they are so often told about the rights of the men who have abused them and who can now click their fingers and drag their victims back through the courts to traumatised them all over again. Women such as Sammy, who have already given evidence, spoken out in criminal trials and been to hell and back, should not then live the rest of their lives trying to bring their children up in horrendously difficult circumstances with the threat of being dragged back through the courts once again to face the man who raped them. It may be the case that no judge would allow such access in any circumstances, but it is surely intolerable for women in this situation to have to face the man in court all over again, and I believe that we as a Parliament should make that crystal clear.

The family procedure rule committee met earlier this week to discuss the consequences of Sammy's case and to consider amending practice direction 12C. I hope that the committee will be able to bring much greater
clearly, this is likely to be in relation to local authorities' duty to notify in the case of a care order. That will not solve the problem, and I worry that, combined with the measures introduced in the Bill, it could bring greater uncertainty to the process and leave victims with even greater uncertainty and fear that their abusers might be able to weaponise the courts against them. As I have said, I am grateful to the Minister for meeting Sammy and me last week, but we were both really disappointed that the Government were not willing to take more immediate action to address this thoroughly intolerable situation. I hope that the Minister will be able to update the House on what action they have now considered and on the implications of the Bill for this important issue.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): It is an honour to take this Bill through its final stages. I should like to start by addressing some of the key points raised today by the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). She suggested that we were sneaking the Bill through the House. However, it was introduced seven months ago. Not only that, but it forms part of the Prisons and Courts Bill, which was introduced in this House in 2017 and which fell at the general election. The provisions in this Bill have been well known for some time. They have been debated in this House, and they are not being sneaked anywhere at all. The thrust of the hon. Lady's speech was that this is a Bill about cuts, but it is certainly not. The Bill is part of our £1 billion court reform programme.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): My hon. and learned Friend is making an important point. In 2010, this country faced its largest budget deficit since the second world war, and all that my constituents want is value for money from the Government. The measures that we are taking forward today may not be the most exciting or sexy things that we will do this House, but they are a key part of value-for-money government.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point that has a number of aspects. First, my Department had to make cuts in 2010 because of the poor financial situation that we inherited from the Labour party. Secondly, it is important that we deliver justice fairly to those who are part of the justice system, but as he says, we also have a duty to the taxpayer. Overlaid on those two points is a third point. Notwithstanding the position we inherited and notwithstanding our duty to taxpayers, my Department is undertaking a significant reform programme that is investing in our justice system. A couple of weeks ago, the Ministry of Justice held a conference at which more than 20 countries from around the world were represented. They talked about their own reform and modernisation programmes, but ours is one of the most ambitious. We are at the forefront of innovation, and we are investing in our justice system to bring it up to date in the 21st century.

Robert Neill: Is this not also important in the context of the speech by Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd in the other place? He said that "the operation of the criminal, civil, tribunals and family procedures rule committees has enabled us far more than any other state to keep our rules up to date."

We need to continue to do that. That is why he stated: "I urge the greatest caution in trying to put into primary legislation anything that restricts in this way the powers of the rule committees."—[Official Report, House of Lords, 16 October 2018; Vol. 793, c. 425.]

Lucy Frazer: That is an important point. Our justice system is renowned throughout the world, thanks to its flexibility, which is enabled by the rules committees along with the other measures that allow us to develop our jurisdiction.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East finished by suggesting that we should listen and take the amendments on board, but we have listened and made amendments. We made amendments in the other place to include safeguards and improve the Bill.

Kevin Hollinrake: The Minister makes a good point about our duty to the taxpayer. Irrespective of this nation’s financial situation, we always have a responsibility to spend the taxpayers’ money wisely. As she knows, Northallerton magistrates court in my constituency will close. She has put in place some mitigation measures to help people to continue to have access to justice, but will she ensure that those measures are in place before the closure of that court?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend and, indeed, Mr Deputy Speaker have campaigned hard about the closure of their local courts, and the dispensing of local justice is important in Northallerton, as it is in Chorley. My hon. Friend makes an important point, because, following campaigning by my hon. Friend and his constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), we committed not to close the court on the basis that we would do so only when the technology was in place to ensure that we could continue to deliver justice. We need to move with the times, but we must also ensure that people get fair procedures and justice in the tribunals.

Robert Neill: My hon. and learned Friend is being most generous in giving way. Does she also recognise that modernising and simplifying procedures saves money not only for the taxpayer, but for litigants? Part of access to justice is about reducing needless costs for litigants.

Lucy Frazer: That is an important point, because when we talk about what we have saved, we often mean what has been saved at the Ministry of Justice, but the reality is that ensuring that justice is served for the people who use it is at the heart of our reforms. Many of our changes have received positive feedback. In a recent trial at the tax tribunal, people were able to access justice from remote locations and not have to go to a physical court. That was well received, because people did not have to disrupt their day by physically entering court. Of course, that will not be appropriate for everyone, but we must ensure that we use the advantages of technology in the future.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. and learned Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice for giving way—[Laughter.] That bought us 32 seconds. I am interested in what she has said. Is she able to dilate—preferably at some
considerable length—on the benefits that might accrue from people not having to go to court in rural areas, such as North Dorset, where public transport is scarce and where not everybody has access to a motor car? The changes could be of huge benefit to large, sparsely populated rural areas such as mine.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and I also represent a rural area. Interestingly, some of the greatest and most interesting innovations at our conference were from Australia, where the geography is an issue, and we can learn a lot from its procedures. Over recent years, 300,000 people have started engaging with our online services, which have been well received.

Simon Hoare: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Lucy Frazer: I will take one intervention and then address the amendments.

Simon Hoare: I am grateful. Can we read across from what my hon. and learned Friend says that she is making strong representations to ministerial colleagues at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, to BT and to other providers to ensure that hotspots, blackspots, notspots—call them what you will—in rural areas that are poorly served by a reliable, speedy, robust internet will be filled to allow all our citizens to access justice and make representations using technology? With the best will in the world, if the technology is not there—I know that my hon. and learned Friend knows this—people will not be able to use it.

2.45 pm

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes a second important point, which is that we cannot roll out and continue to use technology unless the technology actually works. I regularly talk to Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service and others about the importance of ensuring that the systems that we already have in place work well, and that the technology does not fail us when we are going to court at all. Technology will not only enable us to unclog our courts and get quicker hearing times, but give our constituents better access to justice because more people will be engaging with it. It will be cheaper for them to engage, and therefore more people will be able to access fairness and justice in the resolution of their claims.

I turn to the essence of the Bill and the Opposition amendments. Amendment 1 relates to clause 3(3), which provides for the use of the negative resolution procedure, which the hon. Member for Bolton South East suggested is not appropriate when dealing with the judicial functions of staff. However, the Government think that the amendment is inappropriate for several reasons. First, clause 3(3), which provides for the use of the negative resolution procedure, is not actually concerned with judicial functions. Clause 3(3) is in fact cross-referring to clause 3(2), which allows the Secretary of State to make “consequential, transitional, transitory or saving” provisions relating to authorised staff by way of regulations.

In reality, clause 3(3) allows us to amend references in secondary legislation to, for example, justices’ clerk—a post abolished by the Bill—to authorised officer. So far, we have identified over 200 references and over 60 pieces of secondary legislation that would need amendment, and there may be more. It is a standard clause for this type of provision. We know that that is the correct reading of the measure because the power to enable staff to carry out the judicial functions that the hon. Member for Bolton South East is concerned about is actually set out in the procedural rules made by the independent rules committees. This is clear from clause 3(1), which refers not to regulations but to procedure rules. The procedure by which the procedure rules are enacted is set out not in this Bill but in other legislation, namely the Courts Act 2003, the Civil Procedure Act 1997 and the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007.

Amendments 2 to 4 relate to the qualifications of those undertaking advice or judicial functions under the Bill. Amendments 2 and 3 require that any staff member who gives legal advice to lay justices or judges of the family court must be legally qualified and have more than three years’ experience post-qualification. Amendment 4 requires the same qualifications for any staff carrying out judicial functions.

The Government absolutely agree it is important that those who undertake functions in our courts are suitably qualified. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said, and as he has said on many occasions, our justice system is renowned throughout the world, and much of that is down to the experience and quality of our judiciary. Ensuring that those who work within our justice system have the right skills is fundamental to justice.

Neil O’Brien: Members on both sides of the House would agree that we have a world-renowned judiciary. In fact, Members are profoundly nervous when we see headlines in our papers calling judges, “Enemies of the People,” which we would all disavow. These are people who, day in and day out, do things in court that could cause them to be threatened. They are taking risks on behalf of the rest of us, and it is a high-quality system. With that in mind, and given the respect in which the judiciary are held by this House, does my hon. and
learned Friend agree it is important that we do not accidentally do them down in this debate? Does she agree it is not right for the shadow Attorney General to suggest, I think unintentionally, that temporary judges may be less impartial than permanent judges? All our judiciary are high quality.

Lucy Frazer: That is absolutely right. As a former barrister, I appeared regularly before experienced judges, all of whom were full of integrity, undertaking important roles.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East suggested that all judges need qualifications of some kind. Of course, we have magistrates across the country who are doing outstanding jobs in our justice system. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien) mentions, temporary judges, just like full-time judges and judges who operate on a permanent basis, are recruited because of their expertise and skill. They are trained, and they carry out their roles as they should.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. and learned Friend mentioned the fine work done by magistrates. Is there any way we could relax the requirements in order to increase the number of cases that may be considered by magistrates? I understand that magistrates are the most cost-effective part of the justice system.

Lucy Frazer: Magistrates undertake a significant number of roles, and they have vital responsibilities. In fact, they deal with over 95% of all criminal cases, the majority of which are less serious criminal cases, but they are very important. I am pleased recently to have attended the Magistrates Association conference, where I met a number of magistrates who are doing vital work across the country.

James Cleverly (Brantree) (Con): I declare an interest, as my wife is currently going through the process to become a magistrate. I am struck by how the role of magistrates is so little understood. There are a number of people in my professional and personal circles who might make good magistrates, but they are unaware of the process or of the importance of the role. What more could be done to highlight the significant role that magistrates play in the criminal justice system?

Lucy Frazer: I am pleased to hear that Mrs Cleverly is undertaking this important role. My hon. Friend is right that it is important, and employers do understand. The Lloyds banking group recently won an award for encouraging staff to take time off to undertake this important role, and we need to do more to encourage employers to encourage their staff to take part in this important function.

Simon Hoare rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): A short intervention.

Simon Hoare: Everything I do is short, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We are all, thank God, living longer. At some point, might there be merit in reviewing the retirement age both for our judges and our magistrates? With people taking early retirement and so on, the receptacle of wisdom should not be lost to the courts, particularly taking the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Brantree (James Cleverly) on the difficulty of finding people to fill these posts.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We need to move on now. I was very generous before, but magistrates have absolutely nothing to do with the Bill, as the Minister well knows.

Lucy Frazer: I am happy to come on to the three reasons why amendments 2 to 4 cannot be accepted. First, the amendments are not necessary. The functions are already being carried out, and carried out well, by those with lesser qualifications than those sought by the hon. Member for Bolton South East. The qualification requirements for legal advisers in the magistrates court and family court are currently set out in regulations made by the Lord Chancellor, as they have been since 1979, and amendments 2 and 3 would raise the qualifications bar significantly higher than the current regulations and would rule out a large proportion of Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service staff from giving legal advice in future.

James Cartlidge: There are many people in the Chamber with huge legal expertise. All I can claim is spending my year off as a junior outdoor clerk, for which the only qualifications needed were a ponytail and a cockney accent, as far as I could see. From my short experience I discovered the huge number of staff who make up our courts and keep them ticking along. They might be administrative functions, but we should not be afraid of reforming our courts to give those people greater roles that help them to make more of their career.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Not only is it important to ensure that the qualifications match the role, but these reforms will ensure good career progression for competent and organised staff. Similarly, in relation to amendment 4, it is already the case that some staff can exercise judicial functions in almost every jurisdiction except the Crown court. The range of functions they can carry out varies enormously, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) pointed out earlier, from legally qualified legal advisers in the county court setting aside default judgments to non-legally qualified caseworkers in the lower tribunal dealing with postponement requests and issuing knockout warnings.

Accepting amendment 4 would rule out a large proportion of those staff, who are already exercising judicial functions and who may have been doing either or both for a number of years. Such a loss of expertise would be particularly damaging and would impact on the service that Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service can provide. The hon. Member for Bolton South East suggested that introducing authorised staff was damaging to justice, but I did not hear any examples of inappropriate action by any of our current staff who do not currently have those qualifications and who are already carrying out these roles.
Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister is outlining well the position under the current regulations. Does she agree, therefore, that specifying the needed qualifications in primary legislation would be unwelcome when we already have a perfectly effective system that does not require such qualifications, which could then in future be changed by further primary legislation?

Lucy Frazer: That is the heart of the Government’s position, and it takes me neatly on to my second point. The Bill, as drafted, already ensures appropriate procedures are in place to ensure that parties are protected. Those points were clearly put by my hon. Friend the Members for Torbay (Kevin Foster) and for Bromley and Chislehurst—the Chair of the Select Committee on Justice always puts things clearly and cogently. The Bill rightly allows the relevant procedure rule committees to set the requirements relating to the necessary qualifications or experience of these staff in the future, depending on the functions they permit staff to carry out.

3 pm

Kevin Hollinrake: This is an important point. Will my hon. and learned Friend come on to address not only the human cost if these amendments are accepted, with the potential for people in these roles at the moment to lose those jobs, but the financial costs of making those people redundant and replacing them with qualified people?

Lucy Frazer: Yes, those are important points. A large number of people already carry out these important roles and do so very well, and we would like to retain them.

Both the judicial functions that may be carried out by staff and the accompanying qualification requirements will be set out—it is just that they will be set out in the procedure rules, which are made by way of secondary legislation and are therefore subject to parliamentary scrutiny.

Neil O’Brien: Progressive politicians on both sides of the House believe in labour market progression; they believe people should be able to act up, do more, learn more, take their career further and earn more. By putting in primary legislation artificial demarcations that stop skilled people doing things they are capable of doing, we would be doing people down; we would be putting a limit on their aspirations. That is why we must reject these amendments.

Lucy Frazer: That is an important point. Some people are already carrying out these functions and doing them well, and they will be able to see a future career progression for themselves. The legal and other qualifications they should have will be set out, but they will be set out by the committees, which are judicially led and independent of Government, and include representatives of the legal professions, and court and tribunal users. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst said, the judges placed on those are leading the procedure rule committees and have significant expertise. It is they who are best placed to assess the appropriate level of qualification or experience for authorised staff, in the light of the functions they choose to allow those staff to exercise.

My hon. Friend rightly said that the member of staff will not be able to give legal advice or exercise judicial functions until they have been authorised to do so by the Lord Chief Justice or their nominee, or by the Senior President of Tribunals or their delegate. Authorisations are therefore ultimately the responsibility of the judiciary, and those people will not authorise staff unless they are satisfied as to their competence.

Robert Neill: My hon. and learned Friend will know, and perhaps she will confirm, that the way this works in practice is that either the Lord Chief Justice or the Senior President of Tribunals makes the authorisation. Alternatively, in the case of the civil jurisdiction, for example, this will invariably at least go to the senior presiding judge or the presiding judges of the circuit. We are talking about people who, in their administrative role, never mind their judicial capacity, will have visited and met these—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Minister, come on. And you have had three speeches already, Bob, you don’t need to stretch the imagination of the Chamber.

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend, the Chair of the Select Committee, was making an important point. The rule committees are—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Some might think it is very important—[Interruption.]

Lucy Frazer: I hope that more will put in to speak on this important subject. I wish to pick up on what my hon. Friend was saying, because he cited a number of speeches from the other place, where senior members of the judiciary were highlighting the appropriateness of the Government’s position. Lord Neuberger, former President of the Supreme Court, warned that these amendments would place “a potential straitjacket on the ability to appoint the appropriate people to make appropriate decisions.”

He went on to reflect that there “will be many decisions” for which the experience set out in the amendments “would be appropriate, but there will be others where less experience would be adequate for the decision-making.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 10 July 2018; Vol. 792, c. 882.]

Thirdly, I come to an important point that has not yet been mentioned in the House. The amendments would limit flexibility should new routes to legal qualifications emerge. For example, one key change that we have made in the draft regulations that we published alongside the Bill is to include fellows of the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives, or those who have passed the necessary examinations to be a CILEx fellow, among those who can give legal advice. That is a progressive step, but if we were to accept amendments 2 and 3, it would be much harder to respond to such changes in the future, as we would have to amend primary, rather than secondary, legislation.
Furthermore, a legal qualification might not be the most relevant qualification for a particular judicial function. For example, it is more helpful for a registrar in the tax tribunal to be a tax professional by background, rather than a legal professional.

The hon. Member for Bolton South East raised a number of points on independence, and I wish to start by saying that I think the judiciary, whether sitting in court or in committee, has, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said when he was in his place, the highest level of independence and integrity.

The hon. Lady queried, both here and in Committee, the independence of authorised staff, implying that those with a legal qualification were more likely to be independent. Under the Bill, all court and tribunal staff who are authorised to exercise judicial functions will now be independent of the Lord Chancellor when doing so, and subject only to the direction of the Lord Chief Justice or their nominee, or the Senior President of Tribunals or their delegate.

The Bill also provides, for the first time, protections from legal proceedings and costs in legal proceedings and indemnities for all authorised staff when carrying out judicial functions, which will further safeguard their independence in decision making.

Finally, amendment 5 deals with the right of reconsideration of decisions taken by authorised staff in the courts. I wish to start by acknowledging that the hon. Lady and the Opposition have listened carefully to the points made in Committee; I note there is now no amendment dealing with decisions taken by staff in the tribunals, and I welcome that.

It is right that in some circumstances a party to proceedings may wish to have the decision reconsidered, but we remain opposed to the amendment for three reasons. First, the Bill already ensures that a right of reconsideration will be available when appropriate. We believe that the independent procedure rule committees—comprised, as I and others have said, of jurisdictional experts and experienced practitioners—are best placed to decide whether such a right of further reconsideration is needed and, if so, the form that that right should take.

Indeed, the procedure rule committees in the civil and tribunals jurisdictions have already included in their respective rules a specific right to judicial reconsideration for decisions made by authorised persons in appropriate cases. For example, the magistrates courts and the family court have their own existing mechanisms for reviewing various decisions, which amendment 5 would cut across.

Secondly, the right identified by the hon. Lady is too broad, even by her own admission. In speaking to amendments in Committee, she said that “we accept and acknowledge that one should not be able to ask for reconsideration simply because one disagrees with the decision of the authorised person; one must have a cogent reason. There must be proper grounds for requesting a reconsideration.”—[Official Report, Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) [Lords] Public Bill Committee, 4 December 2018, c. 17.]

I was delighted to hear those words, because the Government have also been arguing, both here and in the other place, that a blanket right of reconsideration simply would not work in practice. Yet amendment 5 would give a party in a case an automatic right to request that any decision made by an authorised person exercising the functions of a court be reconsidered by a judge, irrespective of the merits.

Thirdly, the approach we put forward is fair and balanced. The Government listened to concerns about ensuring there were adequate safeguards in the Bill. For that reason, we moved amendments on the right of reconsideration that were accepted on Report in the other place. They effectively require the rule committee, when making rules, to allow authorised staff to exercise judicial functions to consider whether each of those functions should be subject to a right to judicial reconsideration. Where a rule committee decides against the creation of a right of reconsideration, it must inform the Lord Chancellor of its decision and the reasons for it.

The hon. Lady also referred to the Briggs report, and I would like to touch on that very briefly. The recommendations made by Lord Justice Briggs are taken from the report “Civil Courts Structure Review”, the focus of which was the courts of the civil jurisdiction. While an unqualified right of reconsideration might have been appropriate to recommend for the civil courts, given their unique way of working it would be ineffective simply to transpose this recommendation on entirely different jurisdictions.

The civil procedure rule committee has built a right of reconsideration into its rules, but this will not necessarily be appropriate for other jurisdictions. It is for each jurisdiction, with the expertise it has within the rule committee, to decide what is right.

That approach has found favour in the other place. Lord Thomas, former Lord Chief Justice and former chair of the criminal procedure rule committee, said:

“I support what the Government seek to do and urge a substantial degree of caution in respect of the proposals brought forward by the noble Baroness”—that is, Baroness Chakrabarti. He added that the Government’s approach provides the right balance:

“It gives discretion to a body that knows and has a lot of experience, but it contains that degree of explanatory accountability that will make sure that it does not do anything—even if we were to worry that it might—that goes outside a proper and just delegation”.—[Official Report, House of Lords, 16 October 2018; Vol. 793, c. 425-26.]

The Bill strikes the right balance between ensuring appropriate safeguards and transparency of decision making, and leaving the jurisdictional rule committees the discretion to determine the most appropriate mechanism for reviewing decisions by authorised people.

Finally, I would like to respond to the very important points made by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). I was very pleased to meet her and Sammy Woodhouse a week or so ago. She raised issues that are outside the scope of the Bill, but none the less what Sammy went through was harrowing and the hon. Lady made some important points. As she knows, I committed to look very carefully at the issues she raised and I assure her that we are doing that.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, we have already taken some steps. We have, as she alluded to, asked the president of the family court to look at the practice directions and he has committed to doing that with the rule committee.

My officials have spoken to the Association of Directors
of Children’s Services about whether it is appropriate to send further guidance to councils on the circumstances in which they should apply to court not to give notice of hearings to parties, such as happened in the Sammy Woodhouse case. The Department will continue to look closely at those issues.

For all those reasons, this is an important Bill that will ensure that we can bring flexibility to our judges, deploy them in the most flexible way, use their resources where they are needed and not when they are not needed, and ensure that those who operate our court system do so effectively and fairly for the people they serve.

The Ministry of Justice is putting users of the court at the heart of our reforms and of our programme on court reform. The measures will not only save on cost—that is not the primary reason for them, although it is important—but ensure that cases go through the system fairly and well. For those reasons, I urge the hon. Lady to withdraw the amendment.

Yasmin Qureshi: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the amendment.

Amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

Amendment proposed: 2, in the schedule, page 6, line 36, at end insert—

“(aa) is a qualified solicitor, barrister or chartered legal executive with more than three years’ experience post-qualification, and”.

This amendment would stipulate that the minimum legal qualifications for authorised persons should be three years’ experience post-qualification.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 246, Noes 308.

Division No. 279] [3.15 pm

AYES

Abbot, rz Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniacci, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Austin, Ian
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Braddock, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burton, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan

Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Fint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frisby, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harries, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Heburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Holliern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Kealey, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kilin, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Laird, Lesley
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David

Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
O’Hare, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twig, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Stephanie Peacock and
Chris Elmore

**NOES**

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Sim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Breereton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brint, Steve
Brokenhine, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Connor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Challis, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin

Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gamier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halfon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian

Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadson, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merrim, Huw
Melcaffe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Patterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prik, Mr Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Question accordingly negatived.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I have now to announce the result of the deferred Division on the question relating to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority. The Ayes were 513 and the Noes were 312, so the Question was agreed to.

Amendment proposed: 5, in the schedule, page 11, line 32, leave out subsection 67C and insert—

“67C Right to judicial reconsideration of decision made by an authorised person

A party to any decision made by an authorised person in the execution of the person’s duty as an authorised person exercising a relevant judicial function, by virtue of section 67B(1), may apply in writing, within 14 days of the service of the order, to have the decision reconsidered by a judge of the relevant court within 14 days from the date of application.”—(Yasmin Qureshi.)

This amendment would grant people subject to a decision made under delegated powers a statutory right to judicial reconsideration.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 243, Noes 312.

Division No. 280] [3.30 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Braze, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
DAkin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrellly, Paul
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Khan, Alzal
Killen, Ged
Kinnock, Stephen
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lamb, rh Norman
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Stephen
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Henry
McDonald, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bone, Mr Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bottomley, Sir Peter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowie, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley, Ben</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley, rh Karen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brady, Sir Graham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Braverman, Sueilia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breenton, Jack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridgen, Andrew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brine, Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brokenhirst, rh James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce, Fiona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buckland, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burghart, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burns, Conor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burt, rh Alistair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cairns, rh Alun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartidge, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cash, Sir William</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caulfield, Maria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chalk, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chishti, Rehman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chope, Sir Christopher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Churchill, Jo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark, Colin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clark, rh Greg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarke, Mr Simon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cleverly, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffey, Dr Thérèse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collins, Damian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa, Alberto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courts, Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crabb, rh Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crouch, Tracey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, David T. C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Glyn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Mims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davies, Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinenage, Caroline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Djanogly, Mr Jonathan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Docherty, Leo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dodds, rh Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donelan, Michelle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dorries, Ms Nadine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Double, Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowden, Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doyle-Price, Jackie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drax, Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duguid, David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duncan, rh Sir Alan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellis, Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elphicke, Charlie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eustice, George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evans, rh Mr Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evennett, rh Sir David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabrickant, Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fallon, rh Sir Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field, rh Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ford, Vicky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster, Kevin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fox, rh Dr Liam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francois, rh Mr Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frazer, Lucy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freer, Mike</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FYah, Mr Marcus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gale, Sir Roger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gamaner, Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauke, rh Mr David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ghani, Ms Nusrat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibb, rh Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girvan, Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glen, John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goldsmith, Zac</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill, rh Mr Robert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gove, rh Michael</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graham, Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant, Bill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant, Mrs Helen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gray, James</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greyling, rh Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greening, rh Damian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greening, rh Justine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grieve, rh Mr Dominic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Gyimah, Mr Sam |
| Hair, Kirstene |
| Halfon, rh Robert |
| Hall, Luke |
| Hammond, rh Mr Philip |
| Hammond, Stephen |
| Hancock, rh Matt |
| Hands, rh Greg |
| Harper, rh Mr Mark |
| Harrington, Richard |
| Harris, Rebecca |
| Harrison, Trudy |
| Hart, Simon |
| Hayes, rh Sir John |
| Heald, rh Sir Oliver |
| Heappey, James |
| Heaton-Harris, Chris |
| Heaton-Jones, Peter |
| Henderson, Gordon |
| Herbert, rh Nick |
| Hinds, rh Damian |
| Hoare, Simon |
| Hollingbery, George |
| Holinrake, Kevin |
| Hollobone, Mr Philip |
| Hollway, Adam |
| Howell, John |
| Huddleston, Nigel |
| Hughes, Eddie |
| Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy |
| Hurd, rh Mr Nick |
| Jack, Mr Alister |
| James, Margot |
| Javid, rh Saajid |
| Jayawardena, Mr Ranil |
| Jenkin, Sir Bernard |
| Jenkyns, Andrea |
| Jenrick, Robert |
| Johnson, rh Boris |
| Johnson, Dr Caroline |
| Johnson, Gareth |
| Johnson, Joseph |
| Jones, Andrew |
| Jones, rh Mr David |
| Jones, rh Mr Marcus |
| Kawczynski, Daniel |
| Keegan, Gillian |
| Kennedy, Seema |
| Kerr, Stephen |
| Knight, rh Sir Greg |
| Knight, Julia |
| Kwarteng, Kwasi |
| Lamont, John |
| Lancaster, rh Mark |
| Leadsom, rh Andrea |
| Lee, Dr Philip |
| Lefroy, Jeremy |
| Leigh, Sir Edward |
| Leitwin, rh Sir Oliver |
| Lether, Andrew |
| Lewis, rh Brandon |
| Lewis, rh Dr Julian |
| Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian |
| Lidington, rh Mr David |
| Little Pengelly, Emma |
| Lopez, Julia |
| Lopresti, Jack |
| Lorder, Mr Jonathan |
| Loughton, Tim |
| Maclean, Rachel |
| Main, Mrs Anne |
| Mak, Alan |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tellers for the Ayes:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie Peacock and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chris Elmore</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boles, Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackman, Bob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berry, Jake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mordan, Jessica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grasshe, Sir Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benyon, Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berry, Jake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boles, Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuker, Mr Gavlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siddiq, Tulip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skinner, Mr Dennis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaughter, Andy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smeeth, Ruth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Angela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Eleanor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Laura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Owen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smyth, Karin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snell, Gareth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sobel, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speller, rh John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevens, Jo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone, Jamie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streeting, Wes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stringer, Graham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweeney, Mr Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tami, rh Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas, Gareth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas-Symphonds, Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thornberry, rh Emily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timms, rh Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trickett, Jon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turner, Karl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twigg, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twist, Liz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umunna, Chuka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaz, rh Keith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaz, Valerie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker, Thelma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watson, Tom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western, Matt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitehead, Dr Alan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitleft, Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams, Hywel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams, Dr Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamson, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson, Phil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yasin, Mohammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeichner, Daniel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jerseys, Alison</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McInnes, Liz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKinnell, Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMahon, Jim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMorin, Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sears, Ian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miliband, rh Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moon, Mrs Madeleine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moran, Layla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morale, Jessica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murray, Ian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nandy, Lisa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norris, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oon, Melanie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Onwurah, Chi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Osamor, Kate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owen, Albert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pearce, Teresa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennycook, Matthew</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perkins, Toby</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillips, Jess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phillipson, Bridget</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pidcock, Laura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollard, Luke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pound, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powell, Lucy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qureshi, Yasmine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rashid, Faisal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rayner, Angela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed, Mr Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rees, Cristina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rees, Edith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reeves, Rachel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reynolds, Emma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reynolds, Jonathan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rimmer, Ms Marie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodda, Matt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roweley, Danielle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruane, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russell-Moyle, Lloyd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryan, rh Joan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saville Roberts, Liz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shah, Naz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharma, Mr Virendra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherriff, Paula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shuker, Mr Gavlin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siddiq, Tulip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skinner, Mr Dennis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slaughter, Andy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smeeth, Ruth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Angela</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Eleanor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Laura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith, Owen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smyth, Karin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snell, Gareth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sobel, Alex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speller, rh John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevens, Jo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stone, Jamie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Streeting, Wes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stringer, Graham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweeney, Mr Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tami, rh Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas, Gareth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas-Symphonds, Nick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thornberry, rh Emily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timms, rh Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trickett, Jon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turner, Karl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twigg, Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twist, Liz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Umunna, Chuka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaz, rh Keith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaz, Valerie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walker, Thelma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Watson, Tom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western, Matt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitehead, Dr Alan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whitleft, Martin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams, Hywel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams, Dr Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williamson, Chris</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson, Phil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yasin, Mohammad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeichner, Daniel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adams, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afriyie, Adam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ainsworth, Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allin, Heidi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amess, Sir David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew, Stuart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argar, Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atkins, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon, Mr Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badenoch, Mrs Kemi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker, Mr Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin, Harriett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barclay, rh Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baron, Mr John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebb, Guto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benyon, rh Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beresford, Sir Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berry, Jake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackman, Bob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boles, Nick</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adams, Nigel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afriyie, Adam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ainsworth, Philip</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allin, Heidi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amess, Sir David</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew, Stuart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argar, Edward</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atkins, Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bacon, Mr Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Badenoch, Mrs Kemi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker, Mr Steve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baldwin, Harriett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barclay, rh Stephen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baron, Mr John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bebb, Guto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benyon, rh Richard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beresford, Sir Paul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Berry, Jake</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blackman, Bob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boles, Nick</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
certification, the Government will table the appropriate consent motion, copies of which will be made available in the Vote Office and will be distributed by Doorkeepers.

3.44 pm
Sitting suspended.

3.50 pm
On resuming—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I can now inform the House that I have completed certification of the Bill, as required by the Standing Order. I have confirmed the view expressed in Mr Speaker’s provisional certificate issued earlier today. Copies of my final certificate will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website.

Under Standing Order No. 83M, a consent motion is therefore required for the Bill to proceed. Copies of the motion are available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website, and have been made available to Members in the Chamber. Does the Minister intend to move the consent motion?

Lucy Frazer indicated assent.

The House forthwith resolved itself into the Legislative Grand Committee (England and Wales) (Standing Order No. 83M).

[ Dame Rosie Winterton in the Chair]

3.51 pm
David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Committee sit in private.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I am afraid I cannot accept that motion because the hon. Gentleman is not a member of the Committee.

David Linden: On a point of order, Dame Rosie. I am grateful for your indulgence. Can you clarify that the reason why I cannot move that motion is that I represent a constituency in Scotland, and am rendered a second-class Member of the House by the legislative apartheid that is English votes for English laws?

The Second Deputy Chairman: The point is that the Legislative Grand Committee represents Members of Parliament from England and Wales. In no way does that imply that the hon. Gentleman is second-class.

I remind hon. Members that if there is a Division, only Members representing constituencies in England and Wales may vote.

Resolved.

That the Committee consents to Clause 2 of the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill [Lords] as amended in the public bill committee.—(Lucy Frazer.)

The occupant of the Chair left the Chair to report the decision of the Committee (Standing Order No. 83M (6)).

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair, decision reported.

David Linden: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Before we return from the Legislative Grand Committee, my understanding is that, as a Member of the House by the legislative apartheid that is English votes for English laws, I can now inform the House...
representing a Scottish constituency, while I may not be able to move a motion, I can contribute verbally. Is that correct?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has rather missed his chance.

David Linden: I stood to catch your eye.

Madam Deputy Speaker: No, I am afraid you did not. I am very sorry.

Third Reading

3.54 pm

Lucy Frazer: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Third time.

This is a small and technical Bill, but it is a key component of our £1 billion programme of reform that will see our courts and tribunals modernised for the 21st century and, importantly, make access to justice quicker and easier for all. It is also the first step in the legislation that will underpin these reforms, as we will introduce further courts legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The judicial measures in the Bill will enable greater flexibility in the deployment of judges. They will allow the senior judiciary to respond more effectively to changes in demand and to make better use of the skills and experience of the existing cohort of judges. This Bill will free up judges from the most routine tasks by enabling appropriately qualified and experienced staff in courts and tribunals to carry out a wider range of judicial functions than they can at present. Through these measures, the Bill will improve the overall effectiveness and efficiency of courts and tribunals and, importantly, it will reduce delays. This will ensure that we deliver a speedier resolution of matters, which is important in benefiting those who use our courts and tribunals system.

As I have said, this is a short Bill, so I will be brief, but I would not want to finish without thanking the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and other Members of this House for the constructive way in which they have engaged on these issues. I pay tribute to the noble and learned Lord Thomas, the former Lord Chief Justice, and the noble and learned Lord Neuberger, the former President of the Supreme Court—they have been widely quoted in this House—for their wise counsel in the other place and for sharing their expertise on how the measures in the Bill will operate in practice.

I thank the Clerks and other parliamentary staff for helping the proceedings on the Bill to run so smoothly, and I extend my thanks to our hard-working Bill team, our private offices, our Parliamentary Private Secretaries and the Whips. It has been an honour to take the Bill through the House, and I look forward to seeing the important measures it contains being implemented in the coming months. On that basis, I commend the Bill to the House.

3.56 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I, too, thank all hon. Members who have participated in the proceedings on the Bill today and throughout its passage for the considered and learned contributions they have made. I also thank the Public Bill Office, as well as organisations such as the Law Society, the Bar Council and Justice for the expertise and support they have provided throughout these proceedings.

From the outset, we have made clear our reservations about the measures contained in the Bill: the fact that there is no proper parliamentary scrutiny of the delegation of powers to non-judicial staff; the fact that there are no minimum qualifications and experience for staff to whom powers are delegated; and the fact that there is no statutory right to reconsideration by a judge of the decisions made by authorised staff. We have been clear that we are not opposed to the principle of reform and change to our courts system. However, we cannot support the changes in this Bill without the protections that we, the Bar Council and the Law Society, among other organisations, and legal professionals have called for. Unfortunately, on these matters, we feel that we have been ignored, and therefore we will oppose the Bill on Third Reading today.

Judges hold considerable power in our courts system. They have the power to commit individuals to prison, to detain, to repossess, to grant injunctions and to issue search orders, among many others, and it takes judges years to develop the experience and qualifications necessary to wield these powers. That is why we should not take the handling of powers given to them lightly, yet that is precisely what the Government are doing in this Bill. They are passing powers currently exercised by the judiciary to authorised court staff and, most crucially, they are doing so without sufficient scrutiny. The delegation of powers exercised by the procedure rule committees will be done under delegated legislation, with no more safeguards than using a motion under the negative procedure. This is not simply a procedural matter, as the Government have stated today, but one that has the potential to change the nature of our justice system.

Under the Bill, authorised staff will find themselves able to wield considerable power. Although some decisions might seem insignificant, no court decision is small or inconsequential. The smallest decision’s implications can reach far beyond the here and now, well into the advanced stages of a case. We can easily see authorised staff making decisions that are contested because the procedure rule committees, not Parliament, are granting them the power and functions. The Government should have accepted our amendment today to require that when statutory instruments delegating judicial functions to authorised persons are introduced, they are subject to the affirmative procedure, allowing Parliament the necessary scrutiny, but they chose not to do so.

The lack of scrutiny of delegated powers and functions is even more worrying considering the lack of qualifications and experience that the Bill requires to wield them. We rightly expect a minimum standard of our judges, and so do the public. We expect that decisions in our courts are made by those with experience and the necessary qualifications, which is why we have restrictions and a thorough vetting process for those who wish to become members of our judiciary. Justices of the peace—magistrates who do not hold a legal qualification—nevertheless have considerable life experience and are still advised by trained, experienced and qualified legal staff. The Government, however, have imposed none of these requirements of experience and qualification on authorised staff.
In the Public Bill Committee in the Lords, the Minister responsible stated that the minimum standards we sought to impose then, and sought to impose in the Public Bill Committee in this House and again earlier today, would be more restrictive than those that are currently imposed on people providing legal advice in magistrates and family courts. However, that is no excuse and there is no reason why, when authorised staff are making decisions that were previously made by trained and experienced judges, we should not be upholding a higher standard. The Government counter that the decisions being made by authorised staff will be limited and that they will not be contested, but they cannot give that guarantee here today, for even the most basic decisions—extending time for service and taking pleas—may give rise to contention.

Even if we were to provide tight restrictions in the Bill for decisions that were delegated to ensure that they were not contested, that would not alter the fact that even non-contested elements of cases require experience—a view supported by Sir Brian Leveson in his review of the efficiency of criminal proceedings. Furthermore, if staff were legally trained and qualified, they would still be without the benefit of the experience that our judges hold through their many years of service in our legal system. That is why experience is just as crucial here as qualifications, as shown by our amendments and by the support that they received from the Bar Council. There was no reason why the Government could not accept the amendments on this issue, and no reason for them not to hold authorised staff to a higher standard when they are granted the power to make decisions. Clearly, however, the Government thought otherwise of the Bar Council’s expertise.

Our final point is that the Bill fails to provide sufficient safeguards for the decisions that are made by authorised staff, with no statutory right to judicial reconsideration. Clearly, the Government have not taken heed of the warning to be vigilant when judicial powers are being exercised by non-members of the judiciary. The explanations that they have provided in their factsheets—that delegated decisions will not be contested—are insufficient, as are the safeguards provided by the procedure rule committees, which are too open to pressure to reduce the right to reconsideration to ease pressures and backlogs in the courts.

Any legal decision made in our courts must be open to review and appeal. It is a fundamental principle of the rule of law, and the decisions made by authorised staff should be no different, yet the Bill does not uphold that spirit by failing to make available a statutory right to reconsideration. In failing to provide that statutory right, the Government have undermined the expectation of the public that legal decisions will be made by a judge or can be reviewed by a judge, and they have undermined our courts and judicial system in the process.

The Bill is a poor replacement for what should have been and fails to provide protections and safeguards on the changes the Government have introduced. It is on these grounds—the lack of protections for courts, judges and people seeking justice—that we will oppose the Bill today.

4.6 pm

Robert Neill: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain). We have had a constructive and civilised debate on both sides. I do not agree with all his conclusions, but none the less it has been a good debate. I particularly congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Bradford East over the work of Lord Briggs of Westbourne. I know that those involved in his review are most anxious that the Bill contains the minimum standards we sought to impose. I think that the Bill strikes the right balance. I would have liked a bigger Bill, and I would like not to have lost the Prisons and Courts Bill in the 2017 Dissolution, but we are where we are, and this is a valuable step forward. I particularly welcome the hon. Gentleman, who is Chair of the Justice Committee, will accept—no one in the
Opposition is challenging in any way, shape or form the good standing of the judiciary. The point, which has been made time and again, is that certain matters are within the remit of the procedure rule committees, but there are others that this House and the other place should have scrutiny of.

Robert Neill: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said, and I entirely accept the intentions behind it. We will have to differ on the question where the line should be drawn between which decisions are appropriate for Parliament to decide and which are appropriate for the judiciary, but I am grateful for the sentiments that he has expressed, which I am sure have reassured us all.

I am happy to proceed on the basis of recent advice from senior judges who have been referred to in the debate and on the basis of what is in the Bill. It will make savings, and at this point perhaps I can put in a plug to the Minister. It might be appropriate, for example, to use that £6 million-plus to restore the funding for the Family Drug and Alcohol Court National Unit. I particularly regret that we have lost some of the emphasis on problem-solving courts following the loss of the Prisons and Courts Bill. Perhaps, given that we now have a unified planning court, we could also consider the Lord Flight’s suggestion in the other place for the establishment of a unified housing court.

Having made those suggestions for what might happen in future, I will end by saying that I welcome the Bill and will support it today.

4.10 pm

Andy Slaughter: Let me begin by saying that it was indeed a pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee, not least because of its brevity. I think that the Minister alluded to that when she described it as a small Bill. It is a small Bill, but I am afraid it is also a rather inadequate and unsatisfactory Bill. I am not going to repeat the excellent speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain), but he was absolutely right to say that there were no adequate safeguards, and that the nature of the delegation of functions has not been specified sufficiently for us to feel certain that we can support it.

As my hon. Friend observed, the most disappointing aspect of the Bill is that it represents just the shards, or the remains, of the legislation on this subject that we were promised. We hear a great deal about the—is it the £1 billion programme of investment in digitisation in the courts? However, the Bill goes nowhere towards dealing with the serious questions of how that digitisation and so-called reform programme is or is not working, and what the cost to our community is of the loss of well-established and vital court facilities.

4.14 pm

John Howell: I spoke on Second Reading and pointed out the extent to which the courts were undergoing reform. A number of Members have commented on that today and I will not go over what I said in that earlier debate again. It is understood that we are seeing a major reform process and the work of Lord Briggs on this is well understood, but to judge the effectiveness of those reforms and this Bill we must determine whether it passes two tests. First, does it make it easier and swifter to obtain justice? Secondly, does it provide better access to justice? The Bill passes both tests.

The Bill provides better access to justice by making sure that is quicker and swifter, and achieves that by freeing up judges’ time to focus on the most pressing cases. As I said on Second Reading, when I was on the Industry and Parliament Trust course I sat with judges and was able to see their enormous workload. Anything we can do to help free that up has to be a very good thing.

I echo, too, the comments of my hon. and learned Friend the Minister on the planning and housing courts. I have sat with a judge on a planning court, and I thought it achieved a tremendous amount in bringing things together. I take particular pleasure in the work Lord Thomas has done on this, as a former Lord Chief Justice and a reforming Lord Chief Justice. He went out of his way to help reform the system and I am glad he is still doing so. The comments of Lord Neuberger have also been excellent.

I assure the Minister that I support this Bill.
4.17 pm

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) on his excellent speech.

It was a great pleasure to serve on this Committee. Despite the to-ing and fro-ing there was also a lot of cross-party agreement in the Committee; it must be acknowledged that there was some real working together.

The Bill opens up greater flexibility and will over time open up new technologies and the ability to deploy them in order to provide better access to justice. I had a fantastic briefing from the Ministry of Justice where officials went through all the things that will go live over the next few months and years in terms of accessing justice online. I was greatly encouraged by that. I pay tribute to my hon. and learned Friend the Minister who has piloted that and is a champion of it, and who has made real headway in that regard. It will make a real difference on the ground.

The delegation of judicial functions, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) said, is a logical follow-on from the Briggs report. These changes will save £6 million. There will be greater access to justice and greater use of technology. I hope that that £6 million gets ploughed into some of the schemes my colleagues have spoken about. The Ministry of Justice does a fantastic job on what we are, we must acknowledge, limited resources due to the financial situation we inherited.

I am happy to support the Bill, and full speed ahead. Question put. That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 302, Noes 233.

Division No. 281] [4.19 pm

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suela
Breereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew

Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Ephicem, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Mr David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Mr Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Greening, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gyimah, rh Sam
Hair, Kirstene
HAlton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Sir Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick

Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernado
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McFarland, Stephen
McVeY, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Mercer, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill [Lords]

NOES

Haque, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeler, Barbara
Khan, Afzal
Kilren, Ged
Kyle, Peter
Lake, Ben
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorris, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Mike
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Read, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie

Amanda Milling and Iain Stewart

Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Clewyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Darren
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Crudem, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, rh Mr Jim
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Davies, Geraint
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Debono, M Shotamag
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, rh David
Eagle, rh Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farnell, Paul
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frids, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Liian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Diabetes: Artificial Pancreas

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

4.34 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I would like to begin with some acknowledgements to those who contributed towards the material that I will be using today, so let me place on record my thanks to Dr Jacq Allan from Birkbeck University and the charity Diabetics and Eating Disorders; Sandie Atkinson-Goulding; Dr Weston and Dr Zaidi from the Royal Liverpool University Hospital; the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation; Incisive Health; and Diabetes UK. I thank them all for sharing their expertise, briefing notes and academic work with me.

I intend to highlight the technology that is available for people with type 1 diabetes, point out some issues surrounding access to technologies and say a few words about the lack of structured education and psychological support available for type 1 diabetics. To conclude, I will make some suggestions to the Minister on what the Government can do to progress towards artificial pancreas systems.

Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition, where an individual cannot naturally produce insulin. According to JDRF, this condition affects 400,000 people in the UK, of whom 29,000 are children. JDRF is leading on and funding the design of an artificial pancreas, which will change the lives of those affected by type 1 diabetes considerably. The artificial pancreas is in advanced human trials and the work in the UK is being led by Professor Roman Hovorka at the University of Cambridge, with funding from JDRF. Artificial pancreas systems automate blood-sugar management, dramatically reducing type 1 diabetes-related risks and improving the lives of people who have the condition. The artificial pancreas consists of a continuous glucose monitor, a computer programme and an insulin pump that work together to automatically control background insulin levels. These artificial pancreas systems, which may be a combination of existing or newly developed continuous glucose monitoring systems and insulin pump technology, have been termed the “artificial pancreas” because they monitor and adjust insulin levels just as the pancreas does in people who do not suffer from diabetes. Artificial pancreas systems have the potential to transform lives, particularly for those who find it difficult to maintain good blood-glucose control.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that simple continuous glucose monitors that are already available—I believe the Prime Minister wears one—are still not being allowed to children and young people who would benefit from them because some clinical commissioning groups do not prescribe them? When I asked the Secretary of State about this affair, I was told that the Department has no intention of monitoring what CCGs measure. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is not a satisfactory state of affairs?

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. He is right in what he says, and I will be covering precisely that point later in my speech.
A recent JDRF-funded trial found that the artificial pancreas is better at helping people to manage their glucose levels than the best currently available technology. People who used the artificial pancreas spent 65% of time with glucose levels in range, which compares with 54% of time for people using a continuous glucose monitor and an insulin pump. Unfortunately, as my hon. Friend mentioned, there are significant regional variations in access to existing diabetes technologies, such as insulin pumps, in many parts of the country. The most recent national diabetes audit, published in July 2018, shows that although the overall uptake of insulin pumps has increased, the proportion of people with type 1 diabetes attending specialist services who are treated with pumps varies from a pitiful 5% to 40% at best.

Steve McCabe: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that. Friend for that intervention. I am aware of the #WeAreNotWaiting group and as recently as earlier today I had an email from one of them. I will not name them, because I do not have permission to do so.

Mr Howarth: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for that intervention. I am aware of the #WeAreNotWaiting group and as recently as earlier today I had an email from one of them. I will not name them, because I do not have permission to do so.

Jim Shannon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for that intervention. I am aware of the #WeAreNotWaiting group and as recently as earlier today I had an email from one of them. I will not name them, because I do not have permission to do so.
to use the technology that is available. The limited uptake of educational programmes is a matter of great concern, and I hope the Minister shares that concern. Despite guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, in 2014-15 only 2% of people newly diagnosed with type 1 diabetes were recorded as having attended structured education courses. For some, that lack of knowledge of the key principles of self-management is a major barrier to the use of technology, because without sufficient education, type 1 diabetics are not equipped to get the best results from the technology available.

Sir Mike Penning (Hemel Hempstead) (Con): This is a very important debate and I am pleased we have time to listen to it. I will have to go and listen to my leader at 5 o’clock, so I apologise if I leave in the middle of the debate. With type 1 and type 2 diabetes, it is crucial to diagnose as early as possible. With type 1, which is very different from type 2, it is possible to diagnose very early on in the life of that person. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will allude to the differences between lifestyle issues and something that a person normally has when they are born. Surely the answer is testing early, so people can find out and have their educational needs met, and hopefully the product can be available across this great nation of ours.

Mr Howarth: I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman, who has a background in these matters, has drawn attention to the distinction between type 1 and type 2 diabetes. That is not to say that one is superior to the other, but they are two entirely different conditions brought about by entirely different circumstances. As I said in opening my speech, type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition. Nobody is entirely sure what triggers it in some people, but those in whom it is triggered have some predisposition towards the condition.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Howarth: I have not quite finished answering the right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning). It is particularly important to draw the distinction for young people because, often, young people with type 1 diabetes are bullied very cruelly on the basis that their peers in school accuse them of having brought it on themselves by eating too many sweets or too much sugar. Of course, that is complete nonsense, but that does not stop that kind of bullying taking place.

Keith Vaz: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing the debate and on being a champion for those with diabetes throughout his parliamentary career. Can I take him back to the issue of structured education, which is one of the great pillars of diabetes care? We do not do it well enough and we do not give those with type 1 diabetes enough support. Does he agree that it is important to ensure that all CCGs give proper consideration to who delivers that kind of education? It should not be done by anyone other than those with the expertise to deliver it.

Mr Howarth: Yes. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend, who does a massive amount of work as chair of the all-party group on diabetes. He is very knowledgeable on the subject and the issues involved, and he is of course right. I think I had already said more or less the same thing as he just said, but obviously I agree with myself and with my right hon. Friend.

Let me move on to the digital solutions, such as apps, which could offer platforms to deliver education in a convenient and personalised format. I should add the rider that mobile apps need to be safe, reliable and accredited to be clinically safe. It worries me that some apps out there are produced commercially but do not contain wholly accurate information. It is unsafe to rely on apps that are not properly accredited and that have not been assessed and evaluated by experts who know what they are talking about.

In addition to the low uptake of structured education, the number of specialists working in diabetes care is falling. Between 2010 and 2012, there was a 3% fall in the number of NHS sites that employ any diabetes specialist nurses. Anyone who has any experience of dealing with young people with diabetes will know that nurse specialists are often the very best possible source of advice.

In the light of this shortage, a national network of centres—possibly between eight and 10 expert diabetes technology centres, supported by virtual clinics—could well be a potential platform for the development of more effective structured education for patients, and for professionals as well. I shall say more about that in a moment. Such a network would be helpful for training future generations of diabetes clinicians effectively to provide artificial pancreases, and in the development and evaluation of new technologies.

One of the problems that type 1 diabetes sufferers tell me that they experience is the merry-go-round of different services that they have to access. They may have a problem with neuropathy, or a foot or eye problem, but they cannot access all those services in one place. Many diabetologists, although brilliant at dealing with the diabetes side of the problem, are not equipped to deal with young people who have, for example, psychological problems. All the services need to be better integrated.

Sir Mike Penning: I do apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will have to slip away straight after this intervention.

One group of people the right hon. Gentleman missed out, although it was not intentional, was parents. When a child is diagnosed with type 1 diabetes, there is a journey for the parents as well as the child, so there needs to be support for them. I completely agree with the right hon. Gentleman that diabetes does not pick on certain people from certain areas; it just picks on an individual. Sometimes it is hereditary—a lot of work is being done around the hereditary route—but it is not a choice; it is something that comes on to the family, rather than just the individual.

Mr Howarth: The right hon. Gentleman is right, and it was an omission on my part not to have acknowledged that. Any parent of a diabetic child has to experience the disease—at second hand, but in very important ways. The younger the child, the more responsibility parents have to take, so that is important. By the way, training and other support for parents needs to be built into the system.

Jim Shannon: I just want to reinforce what we do for diabetics in Northern Ireland. The surgery that I belong to, in Cuan in Kirkcubbin, holds diabetic classes twice a
year. The staff there do tests on all the diabetics—type 1 and type 2—including for their blood pressure, feet, eyes and all the other things they need to test in the clinics. The surgery then reports back on those tests. For instance, patients will get an eyesight test a month after they have been to the clinic. That shows that there are ways of dealing with this. I am not sure whether surgeries on the United Kingdom mainland do something just as good, but perhaps they should.

Mr Howarth: There are centres where people can access a lot of services in one place in a similar way to what the hon. Gentleman describes as happening in Northern Ireland.

I attended an interesting conference in Vancouver three or four years ago. I found out—the Minister or one of her colleagues might want to investigate this a bit further—that some of the smaller island states tend to provide all the services in one place because they do not have the capacity or resources to do anything else. It is an accident of geography that they are forced to do that, but it seems to work very well, particularly in some of the Pacific island areas, where there is a massive problem with type 2 diabetes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I apologise for coming to the debate a bit late. My right hon. Friend may have touched on this: the issue affects not only families, but schools, which need to have a bigger appreciation of the difficulties that kids experience not only with diabetes, but in other areas. I had a private Member’s Bill some years ago that proposed a cluster of schools having a specialist who could spot early problems with children, including diabetes and all sorts of mental health problems. Does he agree that would be helpful?

Mr Howarth: My hon. Friend may have been late, but he is never behind. Of course I agree with him.

In October, I tabled a written parliamentary question to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, asking how many patients with type 1 diabetes had been referred for psychological support, psychiatric support, and treatment for an eating disorder or diabulimia in the last 12 months. I was told that the information is not held centrally. I then took the matter up with Knowsley clinical commissioning group, but it turns out that it does not hold that information either.

The lack of psychological support for adults and young people with type 1 diabetes is a real and important issue. It was one of the key points in the national service framework for diabetes when that was first brought into being. Most patients on Merseyside, which is my part of the world, still cannot get the support that they need.

Diabulimia, which is a syndrome, rather than a condition, is an eating disorder present among those with type 1 diabetes. It involves the omission of insulin doses, which leads to high blood glucose levels and the body’s cells being deprived of oxygen and energy. The available research suggests that around 40% of females between the ages of 15 and 30 with type 1 diabetes deliberately induce hyperglycaemia and diabetic ketoacidosis in order to bring about weight loss. Anyone can go on the internet and quite easily find out that if they omit to use their insulin, they can probably lose half a stone in a week, but of course the risks in involved in doing so, including damage to vital organs, should not be taken at all.

According to the charity Diabetics with Eating Disorders, 60% of all females with type 1 diabetes will have experienced a clinically diagnosable eating disorder by the age of 25, and new research suggests that 11% of adolescent males also engage in insulin omission for weight loss. I just want to pause at this point and say a word: although I am describing something that affects type 1 diabetics, it is all part of a wider problem of body image and an obsession with a particular type of weight range. Although diabetics, because of their condition, have a different means of achieving that weight loss, it is an issue that has to be addressed nationally. I know that the fashion industry, for example, has started to make some moves in that direction, but it is a national problem, particularly for many young women who feel that they have to look a certain way to be acceptable. That is, of course, nonsensical, but, nevertheless, it is the way that some of them feel.

Sandie Atkinson, a PhD candidate at Liverpool John Moores University, believes that there is a lot more that clinics can do to reduce the psychological impact of type 1 diabetes and, as a consequence, reduce the prevalence of diabulimia. She says:

“By being empathetic to the issues that impact blood glucose level outside of the realm of an individual’s ability to manage and having realistic expectations of them in light of these uncontrollable factors, individuals might feel less inclined to hide their true condition from Healthcare Professionals. The likelihood of them being more open would undoubtedly be in the best interest of the patients and the NHS at large.”

While conducting her research, those whom Sandie spoke to described the problems that they had in accessing support in clinics. One participant said:

“Eating disorders thrive on secrecy and yet people feel with diabetes they can’t be honest about the expectations of where they are with control so there’s two lots of secrecy there that really does a lot more damage.”

A second interviewee said:

“There’s something about the way that we treat diabetes and I don’t know if it’s maybe because there is some internal stigma, but there’s something needs to be done… I just kind of feel like we’ve got it all wrong… right from the off you should have a psychologist… at least for the first year. I mean the research is all there, suicide risk goes up, self-harm risk goes up, mental health declines… We know this but we’re like, ‘oh yeah, we’ll see you in six months’ time’.”

To progress towards artificial pancreas systems, there are a number of things that the Government must do. The NHS needs to establish a new national framework that encourages innovation. The framework could include some of the following elements: first, a national strategy, with allocated funding, for diabetes technology, allowing all people with type 1 diabetes to self-manage their condition by considering individual medical need and the potential to improve quality of life and psychological aspects of care.

Steve McCabe: If the NHS were to develop that approach, would it not, as well as giving people much more freedom, autonomy and control over their life, produce massively more data—the strongest commodity in the NHS at the moment—which would mean that we could predict this condition, and look at other possible methods of controlling or treating it?
Mr Howarth: My hon. Friend is right, and I did highlight earlier that I was unable to get statistics, either centrally or at CCG level. It is important that we collect more data, interpret it properly, and use it to inform policy.

Secondly, there should be mandatory funding accompanying any positive guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence as part of a technology appraisal, and a national clinical consensus pathway that covers artificial pancreas technology, with NICE incorporating that into commissioning guidance. That sounds very bureaucratic, but if it was taken seriously, it could have a major positive impact.

Thirdly, there should be progressive procurement policies that recognise the value, within the foundations of artificial pancreas policy, of innovations such as continuous glucose monitoring and insulin pump therapy. We should encourage continuous glucose monitoring with integration capacity, and insulin pumps that have artificial pancreas potential. I would also encourage continued innovation in diabetes technology. If we are to progress towards an artificial pancreas, the foundations need to be better established across the country; that is in addition to the changes I have highlighted. A 2018 audit of the use of insulin pumps showed a positive increase in usage, but also highlighted a wide disparity between specialist services, which we have already mentioned.

Sandy Martin: Is it not the case that in CCG areas where specialist pumps and continuous glucose monitors are prescribed regularly, the amount of emergency care needed for people with type 1 diabetes is reduced? Not investing in those things makes no financial sense whatever.

Mr Howarth: My hon. Friend is right. This is not just about technology, important though that is. Anyone with diabetes who manages it well—and technology will help to do that—will have fewer hospital emergency admittances. I do not have the statistics to hand—I am not even sure they exist—but those people will clearly have fewer hospital admittances and fewer complications with their diabetes, and therefore cost the NHS less. As I am sure the Minister will acknowledge, however, the NHS is not very good at doing cost-benefit analysis. It needs to get smarter at it, because the point that my hon. Friend makes is right, not only as regards the support we give to people with type 1 diabetes, but about the cost to the NHS of dealing with the consequences.

Liz McInnes: I want to echo the point about cost-benefit analyses and how bad the NHS is at joining up different departments’ budgets. It really needs to get better at being able to identify that spend in one area leads to a huge reduction in spending in another.

Mr Howarth: My hon. Friend makes the point more clearly and eloquently than I did.

A new device that takes us closer to the artificial pancreas has been developed by Medtronic: the MiniMed 670G. A number of people with type 1 diabetes have started using the system in the UK in a pilot phase before it is rolled out more widely across the country. However, only 15.6% of those with type 1 diabetes are using insulin pumps, and it is potentially a concern that healthcare professionals would be unlikely to recommend an artificial pancreas if someone was not already using a pump and continuous glucose monitoring. If the issues to do with NHS access to today’s type 1 diabetes technology can be addressed, a path can be cleared towards adoption of the artificial pancreas.

We need to ensure that people living with diabetes are equipped with the skills to self-manage. That would support patients in using current technologies effectively, and ultimately in using artificial pancreas systems. Structured education is central to enabling people living with type 1 diabetes to best manage their condition through effective use of monitors and insulin pumps. The NHS can support type 1 diabetics to do that by increasing the provision and uptake of diabetes education. To do that, it needs to make diabetes education courses more accessible and convenient, possibly through digital solutions.

A recent survey by Dexcom revealed that more than three quarters of people with diabetes suffer from stress, anxiety attacks or bouts of deep depression. While healthcare teams help, and teach people how to manage their blood glucose levels, type 1 diabetes is largely a self-managed condition. The NHS needs to ensure that the resources and community support that people with type 1 diabetes require are well advertised, well recognised, well understood and well invested in. I believe we are on the threshold of being able to make type 1 diabetes not a thing of the past, but a thing that can be well and easily managed, and I hope the Minister will take these words seriously and do everything she can to advance that day.

5.11 pm

Keith Vaz: Indeed. Before anyone else jumps up with another name, I include all diabetics in what I am saying.

The Prime Minister and others such as myself talk about diabetes, and we are not covering in corners; we are debating it openly. Because of technological advances, we are able to do our jobs and continue with our lives in a way that was not possible when diabetes was first discovered 100 years or so ago.
The first artificial pancreas, which was developed by Sir George Alberti through funding from Diabetes UK, was the size of a filing cabinet. Madam Deputy Speaker, can you imagine walking around with an artificial pancreas of that size? We should always acknowledge the research and innovation of which my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley spoke and the power of science to change people's lives.

I want to give a few examples from my own city of Leicester of the work that has been done on diabetes. There is the work done by Professor Kamlesh Khunti and Melanie Davies of the University of Leicester; my own general practitioner, Professor Azhar Farooqi, who diagnosed me with diabetes—had I not been diagnosed, I might not be standing here today, because I did not know what the symptoms were—and Professor Joan Taylor from De Montfort University, who began developing her own version of the artificial pancreas.

It was very interesting to learn from my right hon. Friend's speech about all the other clever people—probably much cleverer than all of us here—who have been able to develop their own artificial pancreas. Not all of them will be able to fly, so to speak, but it is amazing that people are putting their minds to it, and Professor Joan Taylor at De Montfort has done the same. There is also Professor Hovorka of Cambridge University who, like George Alberti, was funded by Diabetes UK in developing the artificial pancreas. These people deserve our respect and admiration for what they do, because they spend day after day trying to make the medical breakthrough that will help people and save so many lives. I want to thank them for what they have done, because their work has enabled us to get to the position we are in today.

There are also the private companies. Members do of course criticise, as we are entitled to do, the profits made by drugs companies. The Minister will know because she has to sign the cheques—so to speak, but it is amazing that people are putting their minds to it, and Professor Joan Taylor at De Montfort has done the same. There is also Professor Hovorka of Cambridge University who, like George Alberti, was funded by Diabetes UK in developing the artificial pancreas. These people deserve our respect and admiration for what they do, because they spend day after day trying to make the medical breakthrough that will help people and save so many lives. I want to thank them for what they have done, because their work has enabled us to get to the position we are in today.

There are also the private companies. Members do of course criticise, as we are entitled to do, the profits made by drugs companies. The Minister will know because she has to sign the cheques—perhaps she does not sign the cheques, but she sends them to the Treasury to get them signed—when the bills come through for the artificial pancreas and the metformins or Glucophages and all the other things that we take. The cost has gone up and there is no doubt that the drugs companies do make very big profits, but they should be commended for putting back so much of their profits into research and development. That is something that the Government cannot do, but it is something that those companies do every single day.

In acknowledging the huge cost of drugs, we also have to acknowledge what companies such as Novo Nordisk do. I declare an interest in relation to Novo Nordisk, because it has worked with the all-party group on diabetes, which I chair, for a number of years. Roche Diabetes Care is another such company, and there are many more. There are so many of them that I cannot name them all, but they have all been involved, and they will all invest and research until the breakthrough comes.

We know from FreeStyle Libre what Abbott has done. I remember the former Prime Minister—it is of course based in David Cameron's old constituency—telling me five years ago about Abbott and the work it was doing on FreeStyle Libre. Now, thanks to the decision of Ministers, FreeStyle Libre is available, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley has said. That is why, when we have that breakthrough, it is vital that such a facility and such equipment is available to all, irrespective of where they live.

We did not have access to FreeStyle Libre in Leicester, even though we have so many experts at Leicester University and De Montfort, until the decision taken by the Government. Actually, we will not get access to it until next April, so my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and others will have constituents who still want to get FreeStyle Libre, but cannot do so. We do not want that to happen for those who need pumps and artificial pancreases, because it is vital that they get such equipment straightaway. If they do not, it will affect their lives.

What my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley said about wellbeing or mental health and diabetes was interesting. That is something that people very rarely recognise, and I have only myself recognised it, having been a sufferer, in for the past two years or so. They do not actually know it because they think it is part of their condition. For type 1 diabetics, it is even worse. We can just have our pills—I take six in the morning and three at night; some people take more—but the fact is that they live with the injection of insulin for this condition for the rest of their lives.

The deputy leader of the Labour party, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Tom Watson)—obviously, he is not in his place today, because he has other things to do—has reversed his type 2 diabetes. Anyone who sees him in the Division Lobbies will know that he looks a completely different man from the person I knew when I voted for him to be the deputy leader, because he has adopted the Pioppi diet and changed his lifestyle. He does all the things that I do not, because I do not manage my diabetes particularly well. However, people cannot do that with type 1—it is with them forever. The right hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Sir Mike Penning), who obviously has gone to Committee Room 14, mentioned that there is that fundamental difference. Sometimes when we talk about the thousands—or the millions, now—who have type 2 diabetes as opposed to type 1, we talk about people changing their lifestyle, their diet or their wellbeing, but that does not apply to the type 1s.

Sandy Martin: Does my right hon. Friend believe that it would help an awful lot of people with type 1 diabetes if we changed the name of the disease, given that it is completely different from type 2?

Keith Vaz: Of course. There is the possibility of doing that—as we do with cancer, for example, which is a much more emotive illness. Of course, people can die from diabetes complications. My mother died from diabetes complications. What I am noticing from the correspondence that I get as chair of the all-party group is that people are writing to say that their relatives have died of diabetes complications and that clinicians are now putting that on death certificates and, in some cases, voiding insurance. I had a very interesting meeting with an insurance company recently that wanted to void the insurance of a particular individual because they had not notified it that they had type 2 diabetes. I asked its chief executive, “If you cross a road and you are knocked down by a car, and you have type 2 diabetes but didn't know it and had not notified the company,
would you still have your insurance voided?” and he said, “Yes,” which is outrageous. The implications are huge. This is a wide area, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I do not want to try your patience by talking about the whole, global aspects of diabetes. We could be here all night. Forget about the 7 o’clock Adjournment motion—we would be here forever, but actually, we need to be specific about type 1.

In answer to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin), perhaps there is a case for doing what he suggested, because “type 1” and “type 2” are still very technical, whereas with cancer, there is the type of cancer that someone is suffering from. People may not understand that, so it is worth exploring, and we could certainly do that at the all-party group. The vice-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton, is here—we will be able to look at it—and my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley is a frequent visitor. Let us see what we can do about it in future.

I want to end with three asks of the Minister through the good offices of my right hon. Friend. We have talked about CCGs, but we do not have the capacity in CCGs for diabetes champions. We still do not know how many specialist diabetic nurses there are in regions or even in constituencies. The hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage) is a Health Minister, so I am sure that everyone will jump about when she goes back to her constituency, but if she asks the question, “Do we have a list of specialist diabetic nurses?” the answer is no. Do we have a list of those doctors such as David Unwin and others who are doing incredible work on diabetes—even if that work is not shared elsewhere? The answer is no.

In answers to parliamentary questions, I have a list of “don’t know” coming back from Ministers. That is no criticism of the Minister—it is just that Ministers do not know. They do not keep that information centrally. My right hon. Friend, the Member for Knowsley and I, as former Ministers, know that we had to sign PQs like that, too, when we just did not have the answers, because the information is not kept centrally. However, some of this information should be—there should be information about who the specialist nurses are—so could we get the CCGs together in some way to talk to them about the issues raised by my right hon. Friend. Because lives are time-limited if they do not have access to the equipment that he is talking about?

The second issue is that the Government must be prepared to make a commitment, although not to providing additional funding, because the NHS is stretched. Where private sector companies, such as Roche and others, are investing and doing research that will benefit the public, is there any way to assist them by providing them with greater capacity to research, whether through encouragement, incentives or some other means? We need to do that because we do not have the money to do the research ourselves.

The third issue concerns personnel in the Department. I was astonished to learn that the Secretary of State had still not met the diabetes tsar, Professor Jonathan Valabhji. I tabled a question asking when he last met him, and it turned out he had never met the nurse he appointed by the Government to assist in these matters. He is an outstanding diabetes tsar—probably the best the country has ever had—a frequent visitor to our meetings and a professor at St Mary’s, but he has not met the Secretary of State. Please will the Minister talk to her colleagues and ask that one of them meet with Professor Valabhji?

It would be helpful if it was the Secretary of State, though, and would be of some assistance to him.

My final point concerns that made by the hon. Member for Strangford and my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley. Diabetics such as myself—the same applies to type 1 diabetics—have to see nine different professionals, whereas with cancer, which is vital—we should not be made to book another appointment for another day when perhaps we cannot make it; there should be someone to check our eyes, too; and all this at the same time.

In Leicester, we are developing the first diabetes village, where a patient can do the lot on a Saturday morning—all eight of the main functions, including wellbeing, mental health and lifestyle. If someone with type 2 diabetes goes to the doctor in Doha and gets a prescription, before they get their medication, they are sent to a gym to make sure they make the necessary lifestyle changes before their medication kicks in. They have medical centres there with the panoply of services diabetics need.

Tomorrow, we will be holding an international diabetes summit in Committee Room 14, if it is vacated in time. In that respect, my message to Conservative Members is: get on with it, as the Prime Minister would say, and finish it off tonight—I do not have a vote in that election—so that we can have Committee Room 14 back. The Diabetes Minister, the hon. Member for Winchester (Steve Brine), and people from China, Denmark and Italy, are coming to share their experiences, and type 1 diabetes will be high on the agenda. The more of these meetings we hold in this place, the better it is to keep diabetes on the agenda.

Once again, I thank my right hon. Friend. Friend for securing this debate and for making sure we talk about these issues, and I thank my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton, too, for her last debate on diabetes. We should keep putting in for these debates to make sure this is the highest possible priority for the Government.

5.28 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I thank the right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) for his incredible work highlighting the importance of the right treatment for type 1 diabetics and of making use of technology in that treatment. I also thank him for giving us this opportunity to debate the issue. He has made some incredibly valuable suggestions, as indeed has the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). I have listened with great interest and will carefully consider some of their fascinating suggestions.

Supporting the rising number of people with diabetes is one of the major clinical challenges of the 21st century, and improving outcomes and care quality for those living with, or at risk of, diabetes are key priorities for the Government. The right hon. Member for Knowsley correctly highlighted the role that modern technologies, when properly used, can play in the care of people with type 1 diabetes. Key to managing it is, of course, monitoring and controlling glucose levels, and—as he explained in
[Caroline Dinenage]

great depth—a number of different technologies are available for that purpose, including glucose monitoring devices and insulin pumps.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, artificial pancreas devices are an emerging technology that combines continuous glucose monitoring with insulin pumps. One system, the Medtronic 670G system, which he mentioned, was recently approved by the US Food and Drug Administration and a European licence is being pursued. Large randomised clinical studies of similar systems are now beginning and several are expected to come to the market in the next five years. Teams in the UK are leading some of that work.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East talked about the funding of research on diabetes. The Department funds such research through the National Institute for Health Research. In the last five years, the NIHR has awarded just over £144 million for work on diabetes, and 346 active projects are taking place across the NIHR infrastructure. One of them involves the closed-loop insulin delivery system to which he referred.

Giving people access to diabetes technology as swiftly as possible is, of course, a priority. Simon Stevens, chief executive of NHS England, said recently:

“Tens of thousands of people with Type 1 diabetes across the country will benefit from life changing glucose monitors on the NHS.”

The announcement referred to the FreeStyle Libre, a device that the right hon. Member for Leicester East also mentioned. NHS England will ensure that flash glucose monitoring is available on prescription to all patients who qualify for it in line with current recommendations. From April 2019, all qualifying patients will be able to receive it from their local GP or diabetes team.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley talked a lot about structured education and psychological support. In line with existing NICE guidelines, structured education should be offered to all patients within 12 months of diagnosis of diabetes. As he said, reported attendance levels at structured education courses have historically been low, but they continue to increase, and this year alone NHS England has invested £10.5 million to improve attendance by people with type 1 and type 2 diabetes.

Keith Vaz: May I pursue another point raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth)? I understand that the NHS is still paying providers, even though people do not turn up. That is a big problem. We need to look at the providers. There is a reason why people do not turn up. We need to change the system in order to make them more able to do so.

Caroline Dinenage: That is an excellent point. The purpose of the £10.5 million that I have just mentioned is to improve attendance. It is clearly necessary to look at the way in which the service is provided and at who is providing it, and to ensure that it is provided in a way that will make people attend.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley spoke about improving care for those with diabetes and eating disorders, including what is often referred to as diabulimia. I think he will be pleased to hear that NHS England is supporting two pilots to test, trial and evaluate the effect of integrated diabetes and mental health pathways for the identification, assessment and treatment of diabulimia.

We will continue to create a health system that supports innovation, promotes the testing and development of health technology, and ensures that the best innovations are used so that patients can benefit as quickly as possible.

Question put and agreed to.

5.33 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Division

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Richard Lloyd to the office of Independent member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years with effect from 1 December 2018.


Division No. 277]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane | Buckland, Robert
Abrahams, Debbie | Burden, Richard
Adams, Nigel | Burghart, Alex
Afotiam, Bim | Burgon, Richard
Afriyie, Adam | Burns, Conor
Aldous, Peter | Burt, rh Alistair
Ali, Rushanara | Butler, Dawn
Allan, Lucy | Byrne, rh Liam
Allen, Heidi | Cadbury, Ruth
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena | Cairns, rh Alun
Amesbury, Mike | Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Amess, Sir David | Campbell, Mr Gregory
Andrew, Stuart | Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Antoniassz, Tonia | Carden, Dan
Argar, Edward | Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Ashworth, Jonathan | Cartwright, James
Atkins, Victoria | Cash, Sir William
Austin, Ian | Caulfield, Maria
Bacon, rh Mr Richard | Champion, Sarah
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi | Chapman, Jenny
Bailey, Mr Adrian | Charalamous, Bambos
Baker, Mr Steve | Chishii, Rehan
Baldwin, Harriett | Churchill, Jo
Barclay, rh Stephen | Clark, Colin
Baron, Mr John | Clark, rh Greg
Barron, rh Sir Kevin | Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Beckett, rh Margaret | Clarke, Mr Simon
Bellingham, Sir Henry | Clelland, Sir David
Benn, rh Hilary | Clyd, rh Ann
Benyon, rh Richard | Coaker, Vernon
Beresford, Sir Paul | Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Berger, Luciana | Collins, Damian
Berry, Jake | Cooper, Julie
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta | Cooper, Rosie
Blomfield, Paul | Cooper, rh Yvette
Blunt, Crispin | Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Boles, Nick | Costa, Alberto
Bone, Mr Peter | Courts, Robert
Bottomley, Sir Peter | Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Bowie, Andrew | Crabb, rh Stephen
Brabin, Tracy | Crausby, Sir David
Bradley, Ben | Creagh, Mary
Bradley, rh Karen | Creasy, Stella
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben | Crouch, Tracey
Brady, Sir Graham | Cummins, Judith
Braverman, Suella | Cunningham, Alex
Brennan, Kevin | Cunningham, Mr Jim
Breerton, Jack | Daby, Janet
Bridgen, Andrew | Dakin, Nic
Brine, Steve | Davey, rh Sir Edward
Brokenshire, rh James | David, Wayne
Brown, Lyn | Davies, Chris
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas | Davies, David T. C.
Bruce, Fiona | Davies, Glyn
Bryant, Chris | Davies, Mims
Buck, Ms Karen | De Piero, Gloria
Debbounaire, Thangam | Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh | Dinenage, Caroline
Djankoly, Mr Jonathan | Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Anneliese | Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle | Double, Steve
Doughty, Stephen | Dowd, Peter
Dowden, Oliver | Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard | Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack | Dudbridge, James
Duffield, Rosie | Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan, rh Mr Iain | Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria | Efford, Clive
Elliot, Julie | Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias | Elmore, Chris
Ephicke, Charlie | Exterson, Bill
Evans, George | Evatt, James
Evans, Chris | Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael | Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Farrelly, Paul | Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim | Fletcher, Colleen
Ford, Vicky | Flint, rh Caroline
Forster, Kevin | Fothergill, James
Fovargue, Yvonne | Foxcroft, Vicky
Francois, rh Mr Mark | Fraser, Luc
Freeman, George | Freer, Mike
Frith, James | Furniss, Gill
Fysh, rh Mr Marcus | Gaffney, Hugh
Gales, Mike | Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Mark | Gauke, rh Mr David
George, Ruth | Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick | Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul | Glen, John
Glen, John | Glindon, Mary
Goldsmith, Zac | Goodman, Helen
Gove, rh Michael | Graham, Luke
Graham, rh David | Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen | Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris | Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian | Green, Kate
Greening, rh Justine | Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret | Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia | Griffiths, Andrew
Grogan, John | Gwynne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam | Haigh, Louise
Hair, Kirstene | Hall, Luke
Hart, Simon | Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen | Hands, rh Greg
Hanson, rh David | Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet | Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard | Harris, Carolyn
Harris, Rebecca | Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon | Hayes, Helen
Hayes, rh Sir John | Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Healey, rh John | Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris | Heaton-Harris, Peter
Heaton-Jones, Peter | Henderson, Gordon
Hendrick, Sir Mark | Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hepburn, Mr Mark | Herbert, rh Nick
Herron, Lady | Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg | Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon | Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon | Hollern, Kate
Hollingbery, George | Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollolbone, Mr Philip | Hopkins, Kevin
Hopkins, Mr George | Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel | Hughes, Eddie
Hughes, RH | Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Huq, Dr Rupa | Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Hussain, Imran | James, Margot
Jayavarden, Mr Ranil | Javid, rh Said
Jenks, Andrea | Jennick, Robert
John, rh Boris | Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, rh Chris | Johnson, Diana
Johnson, Gareth
Deferred Division  
12 DECEMBER 2018

McKinnell, Catherine  
McInnes, Liz  
McGovern, Alison  
McFadden, Mr Pat  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonagh, Siobhain  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McCabe, Steve  
Maynard, Paul  
McCabe, Steve  
McCarthy, Kelly  
McDonagh, Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonnell, rh John  
McFadden, rh Mr Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McInnes, Liz  
Mckinnell, Catherine  

McManus, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
Mearns, Ian  
Menzies, Mark  
Mercer, Johnny  
Merriman, Huw  
Milliband, rh Edward  
Miller, rh Mrs Maria  
Milling, Amanda  
Mills, Nigel  
Milton, rh Anne  
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew  
Moon, Mrs Madeleine  
Moore, Damien  
Mordaunt, rh Penny  
Morden, Jessica  
Morgan, rh Nicky  
Morgan, Stephen  
Morris, Anne Marie  
Morris, David  
Morris, Graeme  
Morris, James  
Morton, Wendy  
Mundell, rh David  
Murray, lan  
Murray, Mrs Sherryl  
Murrison, Dr Andrew  
Nandy, Lisa  
Neill, Robert  
Newton, Sarah  
Nokes, rh Caroline  
Norris, Alex  
O'Brien, Neil  
Offord, Dr Matthew  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Opperman, Guy  
Osamor, Kate  
Owen, Albert  
Paisley, Ian  
Parish, Neil  
Paterson, rh Mr Owen  
Peacock, Stephanie  
Pearce, Teresa  
Penning, rh Mr Mike  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Penrose, John  
Perkins, Toby  
Perry, rh Claire  
Phillips, Jess  
Phillips, Bridget  
Philp, Chris  
Pidcock, Laura  
Pincher, rh Christopher  
Pollard, Luke  
Poulter, Dr Dan  
Pound, Stephen  
Powell, Rebecca  
Powell, Lucy  
Prentis, Victoria  
Prisk, Mr Mark  
Pursglove, Tom  
Quinn, Jeremy  
Quince, Will  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Raab, rh Dominic  
Rashid, Faisal  
Rayner, Angela  
Redwood, rh John  
Reed, Mr Steve  
Rees, Christina  
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob  
Reeves, Ellie  
Reeves, Rachel  
Reynolds, Emma  
Reynolds, Jonathan  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Robinson, Gavin  
Robinson, Mary  
Rodd, Matt  
Rosindell, Andrew  
Ross, Douglas  
Rowley, Danielle  
Ruane, Chris  
Rudd, rh Amber  
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd  
Rutley, David  
Ryan, rh Joan  
Sandbach, Antonette  
Scully, Paul  
Seely, rh Mrs Bob  
Selous, Andrew  
Shah, Naz  
Shannon, Jim  
Shapps, rh Grant  
Sharma, Alok  
Sharma, Mr Virendra  
Sheerman, Mr Barry  
Shelbrooke, Alec  
Sherriff, Paula  
Shuker, Mr Gavin  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Simpson, David  
Skidmore, Chris  
Slaughter, Andy  
Smeth, Ruth  
Smith, Cat  
Smith, Chloe  
Smith, Eleanor  
Smith, Henry  
Smith, rh Julia  
Smith, Laura  
Smith, Nick  
Smith, Owen  
Smith, Royston  
Smyth, Karin  
Snell, Gareth  
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas  
Sobel, Alex  
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline  
Spencer, Mark  
Stamer, rh Keir  
Stephenson, Andrew  
Stevens, Jo  
Stevenson, John  
Stewart, Bob  
Stewart, Iain  
Stewart, Rory  
Streeter, Mr Gary  
Streeting, Wes  
Stirde, rh Mel  

Stringer, Graham  
Stuart, Graham  
Sturdy, Julian  
Sunak, Rishi  
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
Sweeney, rh Mr Paul  
Swire, rh Sir Hugo  
Thomas, Derek  
Thomas, Gareth  
Thomas-Symonds, Nick  
Thomson, Ross  
Thornberry, rh Emily  
Throup, Maggie  
Timms, rh Stephen  
Tohurist, Kelly  
Tomlinson, Justin  
Tomlinson, Michael  
Tracey, Craig  
Tredinnick, David  
trevelyan, Anne-Marie  
Trickett, Jon  
Truss, rh Elizabeth  
Tugendhat, Tom  
Turner, Karl  
Twigg, Stephen  
Twist, Liz  
Umunna, Chuka  
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward  
Vara, Mr Shailesh  
Vaz, rh Keith  
Vaz, Valerie  
Vickers, Martin  
Villers, rh Theresa  
Walker, Mr Charles  
Walker, Mr Robin  
Walker, Thelma  
Wallace, rh Mr Ben  
Warburton, David  
Warman, Matt  
Watling, Giles  
West, Catherine  
Western, Matt  
Whately, Helen  
Wheeler, Mrs Heather  
Whitehead, Dr Alan  
Whitfield, Martin  
Whittaker, Craig  
Whittingdale, rh Mr John  
Williams, Dr Paul  
Williamson, Chris  
Williamson, rh Gavin  
Wilson, Phil  
Wilson, rh Sammy  
Wollaston, Dr Sarah  
Wright, rh Jeremy  
Yasin, Mohammad  
Zahawi, Nadhim  
Zeichner, Daniel  

NOES  
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert  
Kawczynski, Daniel  
Lucas, Ian C.  
Moran, Layla  
Skinner, Mr Dennis  
Wiggan, Bill  

Question accordingly agreed to.
Oral Answers to Questions

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): The Government are committed to ensuring that there is high-quality mobile coverage where people live, work and travel. We welcome the opportunity that Ofcom’s forthcoming 700 MHz spectrum auction offers to extend coverage across all parts of the UK, and we will work across Government to ensure that we are making full use of the emergency services network that is being rolled out by my colleagues in the Home Office.

Jeremy Wright: The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport was asked—

Mobile Phone Coverage

1. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government are taking to improve mobile phone coverage in all parts of the UK.

Mr Carmichael: That all sounds very well, but it would appear that we still have some way to go. Recent research from Which? and OpenSignal showed that 4G phone users in Scotland can get a 4G signal only 35% of the time on average, compared with 60% in London. In Wales, that figure is as low as 35%. What are the Government doing about that?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman is right about that. We will work across Government to ensure that we are making full use of the emergency services network that is being rolled out by my colleagues in the Home Office.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): It is good to hear the Secretary of State say that there is more work to do because there really is. My constituency runs along the M4 corridor. Some villages just two or three miles from the M4 simply have no coverage—not just no 3G or 4G. Will the Secretary of State set out what additional investment he will provide to ensure not just that there is 4G, but that there is basic mobile phone coverage for many of the villages in my constituency?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. There is more that we can do in relation to the road network. The aspiration is to get to a point in 2022, where all major road networks are covered. As he mentioned, there will then be a knock-on benefit to areas near those roads. One way in which we can do that is to make maximum use of the emergency services network that is being rolled out by my colleagues in the Home Office.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): We have some of the worst networks in the advanced world. We heard yesterday that download speeds in Gloucestershire, for example, are 2,000 times slower than they are in Birmingham. Frankly, it adds insult to injury for those struggling to get on to universal credit, which is of course a digital-only benefit. The National Infrastructure Commission and Ofcom think that it is going to cost something like £11 billion to bring our networks into the 21st century. Today, so will the Secretary of State assure the House that that is the full sum that he is seeking from Her Majesty’s Treasury?

Jeremy Wright: The right hon. Gentleman has gradually shaded into the subject of broadband from mobile coverage, but it is certainly right to point out that considerable progress has been made on digital connectivity of all kinds—both mobile and broadband—over the last few years. There is a radical difference between the position that we are in now and the position we inherited in 2010 but, as I have said a number of times this morning, there is a good deal more to do; the right hon. Gentleman is right about that. We will ensure that we are making full use not just of the market roll-outs, but of the extra support that needs to be provided to the parts of the country that will not be covered by a market roll-out. The right hon. Gentleman will have carefully read the future telecoms infrastructure review that we produced in the summer, which deals exactly with how we reach parts of the country that will not be reached by a market roll-out.

Fixed Odds Betting Terminals: Maximum Stake

3. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): When and how his Department identified that the date of the decision by the House on the statutory instrument to reduce the maximum stake on fixed odds betting terminals will affect the amount that GVC Holdings plc has to pay to former Ladbrokes shareholders.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): We are taking decisive action to ensure that we have a responsible gambling industry that continues to contribute to economic growth while protecting the most vulnerable in our society from gambling-related harm. Such commercial arrangements are a matter for the industry and were not a factor when the Government determined their policy to reduce the stakes on B2 machines.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer and congratulate her on her well-deserved promotion. When the offshore gambling company GVC bought Ladbrokes for £3.9 billion, £700 million was contingent on the date on which statutory instruments were submitted by the Government on reducing the odds on fixed odds betting terminals. Does she think that the shareholders of Ladbrokes, including UK pension companies and employees, should get that £700 million, or should the offshore gambling company GVC pocket it and use it for irresponsible gambling adverts?

Mims Davies: I thank my hon. Friend for making an important point about being responsible in this industry. We have been very clear that we were going to be acting in this space. As the Secretary of State said during an urgent question on 1 November, when determining policy in this area, it would not be “proper for Government to take account of such commercial arrangements”—[Official Report, 1 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1064.]

Data Security

4. Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve the security of data for people and companies. [908174]

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The Government take the protection of data extremely seriously and want the UK to be the safest place to live and work online. The Data Protection Act 2018 makes our data protection framework fit for the digital age, with increased powers and funding for the Information Commissioner. Additionally, we have invested almost £2 billion in our national cyber-security strategy and opened the world-leading National Cyber Security Centre to protect the public and industry.

Mary Robinson: Last month, I held my first ScamSmart event in my constituency, bringing together police, charities and banks to inform residents and discuss with them the dangers of online scamming and the importance of data protection. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that my constituents’ data is safe from these unscrupulous companies and that they are informed about how they can protect themselves?

Margot James: I congratulate my hon. Friend on holding that event, which is a very important thing to do. The new legislation strengthens people’s rights to access their data, to object to the way it is being processed, to ensure that my constituents’ data is safe from these unscrupulous companies and that they are informed about how they can protect themselves.

5. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support public libraries. [908175]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Libraries support people, communities and society as a whole by providing access to books and literature, and, increasingly, to modern technology. My Department, DCMS, established and funds the Libraries Taskforce to implement the Libraries Deliver strategy, which helps to support and reinvigorate England’s public libraries service.

Alex Burghart: I thank the Minister for that answer. There is considerable concern in Shenfield in my constituency that the local library will close, and residents have already put together 1,000 signatures. What steps is the Department taking to ensure the future of local libraries?

Michael Ellis: Local authorities in England have a statutory duty under the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 to provide a “comprehensive and efficient” library service. I caution all local authorities that I will challenge them about their proposed library service reductions in each case, before deciding whether a local inquiry is needed, as it may be in some cases.
**Mr Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover) (Lab): Will the Minister take a trip up to Matlock, where the county offices are for Derbyshire? The Tory-controlled council there has recently announced the closure of 20 libraries and a reduction in the hours of every librarian in the whole county. Something needs to be done urgently. Get up there to Derbyshire and sort it out.

**Michael Ellis**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his charming invitation to Derbyshire. I am always pleased to visit. It is a beautiful county, and I look forward to my visit. I would say to local authorities of any political party that they have a responsibility under the 1964 Act, which this Department takes seriously and has proven so in the past.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): When the library in Lichfield was too costly to maintain, the Tory-controlled Staffordshire County Council sold it and moved the library to a museum in the centre of Lichfield. It will now be bigger and better than before. Will the Minister congratulate the Tory-controlled Staffordshire Council?

**Michael Ellis**: I congratulate my hon. Friend and his council. In fact, councils of all political hues around the country are investing in libraries, building new ones and reinvigorating them. I have opened several myself and visited others that have been renovated. Local authorities are doing that across the country.

**Patrick Grady** (Glasgow North) (SNP): I can give the Minister the example of Glasgow City Council, which has a multimillion-pound investment programme in refurbishing libraries, including the 93-year-old Partick library, which has served communities in my constituency for that length of time. Does he agree that that is welcome investment and shows that it is important to protect libraries and reinvent them, so that they can continue serving communities into the 21st century?

**Michael Ellis**: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and his local authority. I am pleased to say that I have visited Glasgow. The reality is that many libraries need reinvigoration, which needs investment. Local authorities have the resources to do that, and they need to make those choices. We know in this House, across the political divide, that libraries have a high value in our communities and our society, and they should be invested in.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): Mobile libraries are a vital lifeline for rural communities. Will the Minister give an assurance that when he is considering whether to push local authorities further in their provision of services, he will consider that the provision of mobile libraries is essential?

**Michael Ellis**: Yes. Mobile libraries, particularly in rural areas, can be extremely useful. They can visit different villages on different days of the week and be very productive. Many local authorities use mobile libraries, and they are a good thing.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): We know that the roll-out of universal credit and the shutdown of many jobcentres has put a huge amount of pressure on libraries. What discussions has the Minister had with his colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions about the impact on libraries of the UK Government shutting those jobcentres?

**Michael Ellis**: I understand that the DWP made that decision with regard to jobcentres in order to rationalise, with larger jobcentres rather than smaller ones. Libraries are used by our communities for myriad reasons, and that is a positive thing. We want to encourage multiple uses of libraries. They are important community hubs and centres. It is important that they are for the loan of books but are also used for a multiplicity of reasons.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): Northamptonshire County Council previously planned to close most of its libraries but has now announced ambitious plans to maintain county-wide library provision. Will the Minister welcome that development and offer the county council whatever support his Department can provide?

**Michael Ellis**: Yes, I will. I welcome the council’s position. It has an ambition to save all 32 libraries in the county, which I am pleased with. I appreciate that there are challenges, but it is right that the council saves those libraries. I have recused myself from making a decision under the 1964 Act, for obvious reasons—it is my home county—but the reality is that libraries around the country should be supported.

### Broadband: Advertising

6. **Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to protect consumers from misleading broadband advertising.

**The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries** (Margot James): The Government are working with industry and regulators to ensure that consumers receive clear and accurate information to help them make informed choices about their broadband. The Advertising Standards Authority has recently strengthened its rules on broadband advertising to ensure that speed claims in adverts are not misleading. A new Ofcom code of practice on broadband speeds will come into force next March.

**Ian Murray**: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but a High Court case has been raised today to try to overturn the Advertising Standards Authority’s decision to allow broadband to be advertised as fibre when large parts of it are of copper. Given that Edinburgh, where my constituency is, has just become a fibre city and that the Minister herself has called this advertising “misleading”, what can the Government do to ensure that when fibre broadband is advertised, it is indeed fibre end to end and does not have copper?

**Margot James**: I have great sympathy with the hon. Gentleman’s point. As we know, the judicial review of the ASA’s decision, brought by CityFibre, is expected imminently, and we will continue to monitor that issue. In the meantime, however, I hope he can take comfort from the new Ofcom code that comes into effect next March, which will considerably strengthen the situation.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Good broadband services are essential for so many businesses throughout Taunton Deane. Sadly, however, owing to the difficulties...
with Gigaclear, many are still not getting the services they deserve. While Infracapital has revised the plan for the roll-out, it is going to be much longer and slower. Its success will depend on extending the rate for state aid beyond the March 2020 deadline. If we do not do this, many businesses will be jeopardised and homes affected, so will the Minister meet me to discuss the issue?

Margot James: I am aware of the issues raised by my hon. Friend. Indeed, I will meet her and the companies she is concerned about in the new year to discuss the issues she has raised.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): We call it t’internet in Yorkshire. Broadband suppliers are responsible for the universal service obligation. Will they be required to use wireless technologies where those are the most cost-effective solutions?

Margot James: We are aware that, no matter how successful our full fibre programme—and we have our target, as my hon. Friend will know, of full fibre coverage across the UK by 2033—there will be premises for which fibre will never be the optimum route of connection. We will of course consider and urge others to consider wireless technologies where full fibre is not effective.

Women’s Sport: Broadcasting

7. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to support the broadcasting of women’s sport.

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Broadcasters have made significant progress in increasing coverage of women’s sport in recent years. The events covered include the women’s football World cup and Euro championships, the women’s rugby world cup, cycling and tennis. With the success of so many of our women’s sports teams, we should be looking at how many more events can be broadcast to inspire future generations. I will meet broadcasters in the new year to discuss exactly that.

Deidre Brock: While it is good to hear that UEFA has pledged a 50% increase in funding for women’s football from 2020, particularly in view of the terrific news that the English and Scottish women’s football teams have made the World cup, that translates to only £50,000 extra for each of the 55 member associations. Will this Government commit to matching that amount for the UK’s associations, with the specific aim of broadening the appeal of women’s football to the broadcast networks?

Jeremy Wright: Of course we will consider that. I know the hon. Lady will be just as excited by the fact that, on 9 June, England and Scotland will play each other in that World cup; all of us will be looking forward to that. She makes the good point that we must make sure that the attractiveness of women’s sport—and, may I say, of disability sport as well—to broadcasters and to everyone is increased, so that we can inspire those who can then see themselves or people like them playing sport and doing so at a high level. That is exactly what I will discuss with broadcasters in the new year.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): Women’s Twenty20 cricket is a fantastic spectator and TV sport. May we have it in the Commonwealth games?

Jeremy Wright: We will certainly consider that. I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s advocacy for the game. He is right to say that women’s cricket is starting to take off, and he will know that recently, viewing figures for women’s cricket have increased substantially. It is important that the Commonwealth games showcases in the United Kingdom—and more specifically, he would want me to say, in the west midlands—all such sports in any way we can. He will recognise that decisions on which sports are included are not solely—or indeed at all—a matter for the Government, but I understand his point of view.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My constituent, Amy Tinkler, won an Olympic medal for gymnastics. How can the Secretary of State increase coverage of women’s gymnastics to celebrate our success and inspire the next generation of girls?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. I congratulate her constituent. It is important that in gymnastics, as in many other sports, we demonstrate to girls and women that they can participate at a high level, and they should be granted equal coverage and respect for what they do. Broadly speaking that happens in the Olympics, the Commonwealth games and elsewhere, but as I have said, I shall ask broadcasters and sports representative bodies what more we can do to increase the prominence of women’s sport.

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is notable that there are no women’s team sports on the list of protected events that must be offered live to free-to-air TV? Should not events such as the women’s World cup, which is on the BBC next year, be protected so that the whole nation can watch women’s World cups in the future?

Jeremy Wright: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, and as he says, the protected list is designed to ensure that people have access on free-to-air television to these important sporting events. As he pointed out, that is already the case for the next women’s World cup, but we must keep such matters under review, and ensure that if there is a risk that big sporting events will not be covered in that way, we do something about it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), to her place. She has big shoes to fill, but I am sure she will do the job well. I am pleased to hear the Secretary of State’s positive comments, but only 7% of sports media coverage is of women’s sport, which I am sure he will agree is a disgraceful statistic. Will he meet me and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire South (Mhairi Black) to discuss what more can be done to get perhaps 50-50 sports coverage for women’s sport by 2020?

Jeremy Wright: I am happy to meet the hon. Lady, and I share that ambition, as do many broadcasters. Let us take the BBC as a good example. She will know that the BBC has committed to broadcasting 500 extra hours of sport next year, 50% of which will be women’s sport. It is important to recognise that progress is being made, but there is further to go and I am happy to discuss with her what we can do.
Free Television Licences

8. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the BBC on the future of free TV licences for people over the age of 75. [908178]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): I meet the BBC regularly to discuss a range of issues, including the licence fee concession for the over-75s. The BBC has published a consultation that includes a range of options for the public to consider on the future of that concession, and we expect it to make a decision by June next year. I have made it clear that we expect the BBC to continue the concession after 2020.

Diana Johnson: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer, because that popular initiative was introduced by the Labour Government in 2000, in recognition of the fact that that TV is a lifeline for many elderly people, and to give them something back for their contribution to this country. Does the consultation so far indicate that the cost of administering a new system that might include means-testing would far outweigh the savings that the BBC seeks to make?

Jeremy Wright: The hon. Lady makes a fair point about means-testing, and whenever means-testing is proposed, that consideration must be accounted for. The right approach is to allow all those who wish to do so to comment on those consultation options, and for the BBC properly to consider them and decide what to do next. That is now its responsibility. The Government’s expectation is clear as, I suspect, is that of many Members across the House.

Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, this will probably be the only chance I get to wish you, your family and the staff of the House a happy Christmas. We are very grateful for the work you have done for us this year. Thank you. I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mims Davies), to her new position. I am sure she will fill the big shoes.

The Campaign to End Loneliness found that four in 10 older people say that television is their main company. That is a sad Christmas story indeed. Is the Secretary of State aware of how many older people in his constituency are set to lose their free TV licence if the provision becomes linked to pension credit?

Jeremy Wright: It will not be my last opportunity to wish you a happy Christmas, Mr Speaker. I will get to that later.

I am sure the hon. Gentleman is about to tell me the answer to the question he has just asked, which of course supposes a certain outcome to the consultation and the decision-making process at the BBC. I do not think we should make that supposition. It is right for the BBC to consider its options. It is now its responsibility to decide what to do on this matter. It is right for it to consider its options and then propose what it wishes to do. We will all have the opportunity to contribute to that discussion. I know he will do so, and I will too.

Tom Watson: As the Secretary of State does not know the answer I will tell him, because I think he needs to know: 6,060 households in his area could lose their free TV licence if it is means-tested. Many thousands of people in Kenilworth will lose their TV licence despite a Tory manifesto, on which the Minister stood for election, promising that a Tory Government would maintain all pensioner benefits, including free TV licences for everyone over 75. The Government may have devolved welfare cuts to the BBC, but the Secretary of State will not be able to devolve responsibility for this impending policy disaster. Will he now admit, on the record to this House, that the Government have broken a manifesto pledge and he has broken his promise to all those people in his constituency?

Jeremy Wright: No, of course not, because that has not happened. Let me just say again to the right hon. Gentleman that he is positing a hypothetical situation. It has not happened. It is important that the BBC gets the chance to consider the right way forward. All that he says about the importance of television to those who are elderly, particularly those who are lonely, is quite right, but no decision has been made yet. It is right to give the BBC the space in which to make it. That is the right way forward.

Tourism

9. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support tourism throughout the UK. [908179]

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Jeremy Wright): Tourism is an incredibly important part of the UK’s economy, generating approximately £68 billion and employing over 1.5 million people. Visit Britain and the GREAT campaign, backed by Government support, continue to successfully promote the UK internationally. The House will know that the Government will now take forward into formal negotiations a tourism sector deal which will benefit tourism across the country. That is the result of a good deal of hard work by people across the tourism sector and, if I may I say so, others including my hon. Friend the tourism Minister.

Helen Whately: Some of my constituents have bought park homes only to find that they are actually leisure home owners, with very few rights against their landlords who charge extortionate fees and rent rises. I have heard that the mis-selling of leisure homes and the abuse of tenants is happening across the country. Will my right hon. Friend look into this matter and take action to ensure that leisure home owners are not subject to the whims of rogue landlords?

Jeremy Wright: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that important matter. It is vital that anyone engaging in such transactions does so in full possession of the information they need and understands the consequences of their decisions. No one should be taken advantage of in this way. She will understand that this is a matter predominantly for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which has policy responsibility in this area, but I will certainly discuss it with colleagues there. We will see what more we can do.
Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The 2018 Leicestershire Promotions tourism and hospitality awards were held at the end of November. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the almost 500-year-old Loughborough fair, which won the best free event category? Perhaps next November, rather than joining the rollercoaster here, he would like to join the rollercoaster in Loughborough.

Jeremy Wright: That sounds a lot more fun. I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend and congratulate all those involved in the event that she mentions. As she suggests, the importance of what we are doing on tourism, and I hope that this will be reflected in the sector deal, is that tourism can be a hugely successful career—not just a summer job or short-term employment, but a career, and a satisfying one at that. It is important that we make that position clear to all those who seek to enter the workforce, so that we have a high-quality workforce offering a superb tourism product to a large number of people around the world.

Political Coverage: Broadcasting

10. John McNally (Falkirk) (SNP): What recent discussions has he had with broadcasters on the provision of balanced political coverage.

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The regulation of broadcasters’ political coverage is a matter for Ofcom, the independent media regulator. Any televised material is subject to the provisions of Ofcom’s broadcasting code and Ofcom has strong rules in place to ensure the impartiality and accuracy of political coverage.

John McNally: I thank the Minister for that answer. Many of my Falkirk constituents complained to me that the now doomed Brexit debate would have placed two leaders in a head-to-head format, with no input from any of the devolved Administrations. At a time when politicians often complain that the public are not getting the full, balanced picture, does the Minister really believe that this helps to dispel or remove that belief?

Margot James: The debate that the hon. Gentleman referred to did not happen, but it was going to be just between the two main parties—that is true. With regard to Scotland, the BBC will be launching its Scotland channel next year to improve the coverage of Scottish life and Scottish affairs. As regards impartiality, the code will guarantee impartiality across the United Kingdom.

Topical Questions

T1. Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend raises an important point and a matter of concern to many of us. She will know that in relation to the existing superfast programme, there is further to go, and some of that additional benefit can be delivered in rural areas. She will also know that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has allocated £75 million of grant funding from the rural development programme for England for these purposes. She may also be aware that in relation to further technology, we will seek to test out what can be done in rural areas with a test bed and develop 5G technology, which can deliver further benefits, particularly to agriculture.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I add my congratulations to the new Minister for Sport and welcome her to her place. I look forward to working with her.

Moments of sporting history were made during the London Olympics, with billions of pounds invested in what was meant to be an everlasting legacy. Since 2016, 800 grass pitches have been sold off, 100 swimming pools have been drained, a dozen athletics tracks have been closed, and 350 sports halls have been shut. The Olympic legacy is in tatters and it is fuelling our country’s obesity crisis. We need urgent change. so can the new Minister confirm how many new sporting facilities will be opened in 2019?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Mims Davies): I very much welcome my welcome to the Dispatch Box. I will have to write to the hon. Lady about her question, but I dispute the premise that London 2012 is not delivering
Box that I can take back to them to let them know that.

Residents in my constituency who live in Gustard Wood
to request high-speed broadband of at least 10 megabits
have a speed below 2 megabits per second have the right
is there in many constituencies.

Jeremy Wright: I will certainly join the hon. Gentleman
in wishing the teams well, and congratulate them on
reaching this point. The fundraising question was an
ingenious budget bid, but not one that I should answer
now.

Margot James: I assure my hon. Friend that many
possesses, but it is not nearly well enough co-ordinated;
indeed, it is badly co-ordinated. This should be done
better. Will my hon. Friend consider what steps his
Department could take to ensure that co-ordination is
greatly improved?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital,
Culture, Media and Sport (Michael Ellis): Britain is
rated No. 1 in the world for soft power, and my right
hon. Friend is absolutely right about its importance.
Our Department works very closely with the Foreign
and Commonwealth Office in this regard. We have a
large number of bilateral seasons of culture with other
countries, we promote UK culture globally through the
GREAT campaign, which is an extremely successful
marketing campaign—one of the most successful in the
world—and, of course, we visit countries on a cultural
basis. For instance, I was in Rome recently, and I
have also visited the United Arab Emirates. A great deal
goes on.

Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): Will
the Government give football fans an early Christmas
present by announcing their intention to sanction the
introduction of safe standing at stadiums next season?

Mims Davies: I have already met representatives of
the Sports Ground Safety Authority, and a small analysis
is currently under way. This is a hot topic on my desk,
and I will make further announcements in January. In
respect of sports ground safety more broadly, I have
asked the authority to work with those in charge of the
Qatar 2022 World cup to ensure that travelling fans also
have a safe experience.

ATTORNEY GENERAL
The Attorney General was asked—
Contempt of Court

1. Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): What recent discussions
he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the effectiveness
of contempt of court proceedings.

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The institution of
court proceedings for contempt is by me in relation to
each case on its own merits. I institute proceedings
when there is sufficient evidence, and when I, as guardian
of the public interest, decide that it is in the public
interest to do so.
**Legal Advice: Public Disclosure**

2. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): When his Department’s policy on public disclosure of legal advice given by Law Officers to the Government was implemented. [908198]

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): As noted in “Erskine May”, it is a long-standing convention observed by successive Governments that neither the fact nor the substance of Law Officers’ advice is disclosed outside the Government without their authority. That authority is very rarely sought or given.

Michael Fabricant: Given that recent decisions of the House might mean a return to Tony Blair-style sofa Government, does my right hon. and learned Friend think the Humble Address procedure needs revisiting?

The Attorney General: Of course, the corrosive effect of the disclosure of confidential advice is that in future Attorneys General will not be able, without risking and fearing its publication, to give frank and robust advice to the Cabinet or the Prime Minister when it is needed, with the point and emphasis that might be needed at that particular time. The risk if it is published is that it is taken out of context, parts of it are seized and plucked and dwelt upon, and the particular moment and context of the advice is ignored. I do think we need to look very carefully at the procedures of the House in this regard while paying due respect to the legitimate desire of the House to have all of the information that it requires.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I think we all understand what the Attorney General’s preferences are in this matter. In response to my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), he said that the advice in his letter to the Prime Minister was full and final. It is credible that it is the final legal advice, but it is not credible that it is the full legal advice. Is that seriously what the Attorney General wants us to believe?

The Attorney General: The request of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) was for the final and full advice. As I understand it—I read what he said in Hansard—he requested all the final advice. In other words, he requested that it should not be summarised, and it was not. The House had all the final advice given to the Cabinet.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Attorney General further outline when the legal opinion on changes to the withdrawal agreement sought by the Prime Minister will be released, to clarify any change in his legal advice?
The Attorney General: As I have just said, I will of course consider what assistance the House might require. Indeed, I shall listen carefully to the House on any changes that are introduced to the withdrawal agreement and on what the Government should do about publishing legal opinion on it.

Leaving the EU: Human Rights

3. Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the protection of human rights.

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The United Kingdom has a long tradition of ensuring that rights and liberties are protected domestically, and of fulfilling its international human rights obligations. The decision to leave the European Union does not change this.

Deidre Brock: I am proud to say that the Scottish Government announced plans this week to introduce a new statutory human rights framework across Scotland. That will help to ensure that Brexit does not lead to an erosion of human rights in Scotland, while enshrining rights already included in the United Nations treaties. Will the Attorney General join me in welcoming this progressive step? Will he also confirm what measures he will be recommending to his own Cabinet colleagues to ensure that human rights are protected in the event of Brexit?

The Attorney General: I am always interested to see the measures that are being introduced in the Scottish legal system, because Scotland has a sophisticated and highly effective administration of justice for which I have the greatest respect. Indeed, we can learn a good deal from Scotland in that regard; the same applies to both traditions on both sides of the border. In England and Wales, we are fully committed to the human rights framework of the European convention on human rights, and we have a proud common law tradition of defending those rights. I would expect that common law tradition to continue to evolve, and I would expect that the courts of this country, freed from the European Union, will start to develop their own jurisprudence, making even more effective the protection of those rights. However, I will look at what the hon. Lady has spoken of today with the greatest interest.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): In the hurly-burly of the Brexit debate, there are a number of things to be concerned about. However, this country is very much the creator, cherisher and nurturer of human rights, and we have a proud record in that area both domestically and in leading on the international stage. Does my right hon. and learned Friend therefore agree that this is one area of public policy that Brexit should not create any anxiety about?

The Attorney General: I quite agree with my hon. Friend. This country was at the forefront of the development of civil liberties and human rights. We have a robust, fiercely independent judiciary, and we have an effective legal profession on which the vindication of those rights often depends. We should be very proud indeed of the tradition that we have inherited.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): The Human Rights Act 1998 is one of Labour’s proudest achievements in government, and we will fight to protect the rights and protections that it affords. I noticed that the Attorney General did not mention that in his answer to the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). Will he join us in making a commitment to preserving the Human Rights Act?

The Attorney General: It would be unwise for me to think that any Act of Parliament could not benefit from review and subsequent improvement as time goes on, but I can assure the hon. Lady that this Government—and, I am sure, successive Governments—will be wedded to both the rule of law and human rights in this country.

Article 50: European Court of Justice Decision

4. Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): What implications the decision by the European Court of Justice on the revocability of article 50 has for his legal advice to the Government.

The Attorney General (Mr Geoffrey Cox): The decision of the European Court of Justice clarifies a question of EU law, and it does not in any way change the Government’s policy. The Government’s firm and long-standing policy is that we will not revoke the article 50 notice. The position has not changed and, as is well known, the case will now revert to the Scottish courts for the final decision.

Martyn Day: Will the Attorney General take this opportunity to confirm that he advised the Prime Minister that the ECJ’s ruling means that voting against her deal does not automatically mean a no-deal Brexit, and that revoking the article 50 notice and remaining in the EU under current terms and conditions is a third option?

The Attorney General: The Government’s policy is that we do not intend to revoke article 50. We intend to leave the European Union on 29 March, and the fact or otherwise of the irrevocability of article 50 is wholly irrelevant to that question. The truth, however, is that the giving of notice under article 50 would not just be an easy matter of pressing a button and the revocation taking effect.

Alison Thewliss: Does the Attorney General believe that legislation would be required to revoke the article 50 notice, or could it be done by a simple vote in this House?

The Attorney General: That matter is under review. Let me say clearly that the question of what legal route would be required to trigger the process has not been considered at any length because there is no intention of doing so.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Government fought this case tooth and nail through the Scottish courts and in Luxembourg. Will the Attorney
General tell us why the Government were so desperate to prevent Members of Parliament and the public from knowing that article 50 could be unilaterally revoked and that we could stay in the European Union on the same terms and conditions that we currently enjoy? Will he also answer a question that Cabinet Ministers have so far failed to answer? How much taxpayers’ money was spent trying to keep this House and the public in the dark?

The Attorney General: As the hon. and learned Lady knows, the Government’s position throughout was that the case involved a hypothetical question. It does raise an important matter of constitutional principle as to whether courts should be able to be seized of issues under live debate in Parliament, when Parliament does not ask for an opinion, simply in order to inform debate. The Government took the view that the matter was hypothetical—we still do—but the truth of the matter is that the ECJ has ruled and we are where we are.

Economic Crime

5. Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): What support he is providing to the (a) Crown Prosecution Service and (b) Serious Fraud Office to tackle economic crime.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): The Government are committed to tackling economic crime, and we know that that requires a multi-agency response. That is why both the SFO and the CPS play their parts alongside others, including through their support for the new multi-agency National Economic Crime Centre.

Jack Brereton: What assessment has been made of the UK’s ability to tackle money laundering?

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue, and I was glad to see the recent financial action taskforce report, which reflected substantial progress and referred to the world-leading role that the UK plays in the fight against illicit finance, particularly the risk of money laundering.

Rebecca Pow: Nothing annoys the constituents of Taunton Deane more than people getting away with things they should not, so will my hon. and learned Friend outline some further detail on how we are cracking down on money laundering? It is a priority, and the Government have promised to tackle it.

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend will be glad to note the introduction of unexplained wealth orders following the Criminal Finances Act 2017. That is already sending a clear message to those who seek to use the UK to wash their illegal proceeds that we will track them down, ask the right questions and conduct confiscations. Using Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 powers, the Government have recovered more criminal assets than ever before, with £1.6 billion taken from wrongdoers between April 2010 and March 2018.

Crown Prosecution Service: Performance

7. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What comparative assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS’s recent prosecution performance in (a) Northamptonshire and (b) England.

The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): CPS performance in Northamptonshire is above the national rate in several areas. The latest figures for the first quarter of 2018-19 show that the conviction rate for Northamptonshire magistrates courts was 85.7%, which is above the national rate of 84.8%. Figures also show lower hearing numbers per guilty plea case than the national rate, which reflects the fact that the CPS is putting cases together efficiently.

Mr Hollobone: I thank the Crown Prosecution Service for its work in Northamptonshire. Which aspects of its work does the Solicitor General think are in most need of improvement?

The Solicitor General: The CPS in Northamptonshire and the east midlands, like in all other regions, acknowledges that it should never rest on any laurels it might gather. I urge my hon. Friend to meet the chief Crown prosecutors and staff to focus on particular areas where he thinks the CPS in Northamptonshire and the east midlands needs to make progress. Recent quarterly and monthly figures show that in many areas, such as burglary, it has been above average, but I am sure it would welcome his constructive input.

Corrosive Substances: Prosecutions

8. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the CPS in prosecuting crimes involving corrosive substances.

The Solicitor General: Corrosive substance attacks are unacceptable. There is no place in society for these horrendous crimes. Last month, the CPS successfully secured the conviction of nine men for carrying out a violent attack in which a corrosive substance was squirted at bystanders who tried to stop an assault in the street.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What account is taken of gangs in this context?

The Solicitor General: My right hon. Friend is right to raise the sad connection with gang offending. Sadly, corrosive substances are sometimes used as weapons by gangs in retribution and as a means of enforcement. The CPS guidance identifies that phenomenon and encourages prosecutors to apply for criminal behaviour orders to prevent such gang-related offending.

Royal Albert Hall

10. Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): If he will support the Charity Commission’s request to refer the Royal Albert Hall to the charity tribunal.
The Solicitor General (Robert Buckland): Earlier this year, the Charity Commission wrote to the former Attorney General requesting consent to refer five questions to the first-tier tribunal concerning the registered charity that runs the Royal Albert Hall. Although the Charity Commission has the power to refer questions to the tribunal, it may only do so with the consent of the Attorney General, as set out in section 325 of the Charities Act 2011.

Mrs Hodgson: The Attorney General promised that he would make a decision on this matter by the end of the autumn. I am sure we are now in winter, so that decision is overdue. The majority of the Royal Albert Hall’s ruling body own a quarter of all the seats. Those seats are valued at up to £25 million, and they are allowed to sell tickets for the seats on the secondary market, making huge profits. Does the Attorney General not consider that a conflict of interest, and will he allow the Charity Commission to refer it to the tribunal?

The Solicitor General: The hon. Lady has identified the core of the concern in this case. Before assessing whether I or the Attorney General should consent to the Charity Commission’s request, we invited both the corporation of the Royal Albert Hall and the Charity Commission to make further representations. We have received those representations, and we are in the process of considering them with a view to issuing a decision in due course.
Business of the House

10.37 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

The business for next week is as follows:

Monday 17 December—My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will make a statement, followed by a motion to approve the draft Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations 2018, followed by a motion to approve the draft guidance on ancillary service providers 2018.

Tuesday 18 December—Second Reading of the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords].

Wednesday 19 December—Debate on a motion on disability benefit, followed by debate on a motion on mental health first aid. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Thursday 20 December—Debate on a motion on Rohingya. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 21 December—The House will not be sitting.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): Are you sure?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure the House will not be sitting. The House decided.

The whole House will want to join me in thanking the police for their swift action following the incident in New Palace Yard earlier this week. We are enormously grateful for the work our police and security officers do to keep us all safe.

I am pleased to be able to spread some festive cheer to the House this morning, as the new edition of “Erskine May”, which is due to be published in 2019, will be publicly available on Parliament’s website, as well as on Parliament’s intranet and in hard copy, as normal. The first edition was published in the mid-19th century and new editions are published approximately every six or seven years, but this will be the first one publicly available online.

Finally, I encourage all hon. Members to visit the 209 Women exhibition on the first floor of Portcullis House, which begins tomorrow and will run until 14 February. It is being unveiled in time for the centenary of some women voting for the first time. I will be heading to the launch later to see the 209 photographs of female MPs, photographed by female photographers and curated by women. It is a fantastic way to round off the Vote 100 year.

Mr Speaker: It is very useful to have the fact of the prospective publication on the Parliament website of “Erskine May” advertised more widely, but there is nothing by way of news about it; I agreed to it, in consultation with Clerks, several months ago. It is very good that it is happening but there is absolutely nothing new about the fact of it.

Valerie Vaz: I agree with you about “Erskine May”. Mr Speaker; the public will now be able to see what the Government are up to, so that is good. May I also acknowledge that the House has a female photographer, Jessica Taylor, who is absolutely marvellous? She does us all proud, because we all look better in her photographs, for some reason.

I thank the Leader of the House for giving us the business for next week. I do not know whether I heard her properly, but has she given us all the business for next week? I did not hear when the debate on the meaningful vote will resume. Obviously, it is not listed for next week, so when will it come back? Each week we stand here and we trust what the Leader of the House says and we trust the agreements we make. How can we continue to trust this Government? Their mantra is, “Nothing is agreed until it is agreed”, but it should now be, “Nothing is agreed ever.” Even now, the Prime Minister, having made an agreement with the EU, is saying that she will go back and find another way. The Government spent money, and Ministers spread out around the country, but the people they had to convince were here in Parliament. What did the Government do? They did not listen to Parliament—in fact, they told Parliament to shut up. The Leader of the House said this was “Parliamentary pantomime”, but it is not. The Opposition have used settled rules of Parliament to hold the Government to account. At each stage of this process, we have had to drag Ministers back to the Dispatch Box to give us financial information and other impact information on what is happening.

The Government have ridden roughshod over the democratic rights of Members. Mr Speaker, you sat through all the contributions and on one of the days we were here until 1.30 am. Hon. Members were here until then. Time limits were applied, showing that hon. Members had to be curtailed in their speeches. One hundred and sixty-four hon. Members were heard, and almost the same amount of other hon. Members had written their speeches and their contributions were stymied. The Leader of the House must say when they will be given the chance to make their case. Will the debate be resuming or will we have a debate on a new deal—which is it? The Prime Minister cannot amend the agreement, so it is, in effect, just an explanatory note, is it not? Can the Leader of the House clarify whether it will be an addendum or an explanatory note?

The Leader of the House said on Monday, and other Ministers have said this, that we will have our meaningful vote “soon”, “shortly” and “before 21 January”. She said five times on Monday that she is Parliament’s voice in government. Parliament spoke with the vote on the emergency debate on the cancellation of the vote—the vote was won by 299 to zero, which is more resounding than 200 to 117. So on Monday will she make a business statement to say when the meaningful vote will come back before Parliament?

We have had a number of statutory instruments given in the business for next week. I note that the new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has said that she will look at the draft Universal Credit (Managed Migration) Regulations 2018. Can the Leader of the House confirm that those regulations have now been withdrawn? We will also have the Draft Markets in Financial Instruments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 to consider. That statutory instrument is one of a
large volume of items of secondary legislation. It sets up a functioning regulatory framework if the UK leaves the European Union without a deal. The size and scope of that SI are completely different. Because of the volume of potential legislative changes, the Treasury has set out a Keeling schedule, and it spent time and money setting out that schedule. As the Government are going to all that effort, will the Leader of the House please confirm that we will debate those regulations on the Floor of the House?

I note that a written statement on immigration is to be published today. So far, it has been impossible to access it; is it the immigration White Paper?

While the Government have been distracted in Committee Room 14, local councils have been waiting to set their budgets. I know that you get upset by points of order, Mr Speaker—or perhaps you do not; perhaps you like them—but my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne) made one yesterday on the local government settlement, so I am pleased that there will be a statement on it later. I am also pleased that there will be a statement on the police settlement. I, too, offer my thanks to the police officers who contained the incident on Tuesday, and who keep us safe every day.

Yesterday, at Prime Minister’s Question Time, the Prime Minister said that the Government are establishing a 10-year plan for the sustainability of the NHS. Where is it? The plan was promised in September, then in autumn, and then in early December, but still there is nothing. Will the Leader of the House say when it will be published?

The Government are running away from their responsibilities and leaving the country in a mess—so much so that the Prime Minister has said that she will not be around at the next election to be held accountable for her policies so far. There is something to celebrate, though: the tax on visiting Wales has ended, because the Severn bridge toll will end on Monday.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) for all her charitable work on the carol service— it all seemed to get lost on Tuesday. She has raised an enormous amount of money already, but is encouraging us to organise carol concerts so that we can all contribute and add to her charitable work. We have to hurry, though, because we have only 12 days till Christmas.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am certainly grateful to the hon. Lady for mentioning the lovely concert that my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) arranged in St Margaret’s church. It was really wonderful, and we were treated to the rather amazing singing voice of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince)—who knew? It was a very enjoyable experience and was for a fantastic cause. We heard some extraordinary and heart-wrenching stories about the current plight of Syrians, so it was incredibly important.

The hon. Lady asked when the meaningful vote will come back to the House. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster said on Tuesday, the Government will bring the debate and vote back to the House by 21 January at the latest.

The hon. Lady asked about the Prime Minister. She will understand that the Prime Minister came to the House to make a statement to say precisely that it is because she is listening to the debate in this House that she is going back to the EU, because she recognises that hon. Members require not only reassurances but legally binding reassurance that we cannot be trapped in a backstop permanently. That is what the Prime Minister is seeking. Hon. Members should rest assured that the Prime Minister is very much seeking to address the concerns expressed by the House.

The hon. Lady asked about statutory instruments. She will be aware that it is a matter of parliamentary convention that, if a reasonable request for a debate has been made, time is allowed for that debate. We have demonstrated during this Session that the Government have been willing to provide time, in line with the convention to accede with reasonable Opposition requests. I know that the Opposition would like to debate a number of statutory instruments on the Floor of the House, and we are looking at them carefully.

The hon. Lady asked about the immigration White Paper. I assure her that it will be published next week, before Christmas, shortly followed by the immigration Bill itself.

The hon. Lady asked where the NHS 10-year plan is. It is being drawn up by the NHS itself. The Government have provided the biggest ever investment in our NHS, and we are very proud to be doing that. It will transform services for all patients right across the country.

**Ms Esther McVey** (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I, too, offer my thanks to the police officers who contained the incident on Tuesday, and who keep us safe every day.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week.

Well, it is the morning after the night before, and, as the hangovers start to kick in, they will all be asking themselves, “What on earth did we get up to last night?” As they survey the wreckage of the night of mayhem, we now find that we have a Prime Minister who has the confidence of only 200 Members of this House. She is a lame duck Prime Minister who would give waterfowl with walking sticks a bad name. A third of her party do not want her to lead them. Her credibility is in shatters and her ability to lead gone forever.

The main item of business next week should be a motion of no confidence in this rotten, divided Government. They are there for the taking, divided, wounded and
unable to govern, and I have no idea what the Labour party is waiting for. We could be shot of them pretty soon, so if Labour is not going to put in a motion of no confidence in this Government, it will be left to the other opposition parties of this House to do so.

History will judge the decision to cancel Tuesday’s meaningful vote as probably the single biggest act of political cowardice this House has ever witnessed, particularly when the Leader of the House said to me definitively last week that under no conditions would the vote be withdrawn. If we look at the diary, we can see that there are only two weeks left to have that meaningful vote when we return in the new year, if it is not the Government’s intention to bring it forward next week. It cannot be the last week—the week leading up to the 21st—so that leaves the week that we return. I want the Leader of the House to come to that Dispatch Box and say that we will have this vote in that week.

Finally, we need an urgent statement about the decision of the Supreme Court to uphold the Scottish Government’s view that the continuity Bill is indeed within devolved powers. This Government are now developing a habit of losing constitutional cases to Scottish interests. Hopefully, this will now mean the end of the power grab and the attacks on the democratic institutions of our democracy in Scotland, but looking at Members on the Government Benches, I very much doubt that.

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for setting out the fact that those of us on the Government Benches do have confidence in the Prime Minister. Perhaps I can just set the scene for him: the Prime Minister won 63% of the vote, against 37% who did not support her, which means that she won that vote by a significant majority. In June 2016, this House decided to ask the people whether we should leave the EU or remain within it. A total of 52% said that we should leave, and 48% said that we should remain. That means that leave won, which is why we are leaving the EU—just for his information. He will recall that, in Scotland, there was a vote on whether Scotland should leave the United Kingdom, and 55% voted to stay in, 45% voted to leave. That means that a majority voted to stay in the United Kingdom. I hope that that explains to him what a democratic vote is all about. [Interruption.] I say to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald), who is shouting from a sedentary position, that he will recall that his no confidence vote in his leader was 81% for no confidence, but the Leader of the Opposition is still there, so the Opposition party also does not understand what democracy is all about; at least we on this side of the House do. I say to all hon. Members, once again, that the Prime Minister did not call the vote on the meaningful vote because she had listened to the very clear concerns of hon. and right hon. Members, and has gone back to the European Union to seek to address those concerns.

The hon. Gentleman asks about a no confidence motion. This House has confidence in the Government. If the official Opposition dispute that the Government have the confidence of the House, it is for them to test it via a motion under the terms of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.
Mr Speaker: I call Jess Phillips.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

“She’s so cute. So sweet. I can’t wait to beat her.”

“Can she take a beating?”

Those are not my words, but the words of the hon. Member for Burton (Andrew Griffiths) while barraging two of his female constituents with thousands of sexual text messages. Last night, the Leader of the House’s party gave him and the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) the Whip back without any due process. What message does this send about how any process in this place can ever be trusted? I ask the Leader of the House to answer that question and also to tell me what matters more—political power or tackling victims of sexual harassment and abuse?

Mr Speaker: Order. Before I ask the Leader of the House to answer that question, which is an entirely proper question, can I just say to the hon. Lady that I trust that she notified the two Members concerned?

Jess Phillips indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: She has done, and that is absolutely proper. Thank you.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know that I am absolutely committed to changing the culture of this place and to seeing that everybody here is treated with dignity and respect. There has been a process that has been undertaken. It has been a decision by the Chief Whip. It is not something I have been privy to. But I absolutely assure all hon. and right hon. Members that the independent complaints procedure, which is not involved with any party political processes whatever, was established and designed to enable everybody who works in or visits this place to take any complaints that they have to an independent place for proper investigation and proper sanction to be applied.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): On 15 March a private Member’s Bill in my name is scheduled; it would create a commission for a general election leaders’ debate. I know that on the first day back a Westminster Hall debate on this will take place because more than 100,000 signatures were provided to the Sky News petition. Will the Leader of the House confirm that the Government intend to support my private Member’s Bill on 15 March—and, by the way, could we make it a sitting Friday?

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted to take up the requests of my hon. Friend and neighbour in Northamptonshire. He will be aware that I have tabled a motion to provide the House with an additional six sitting days—something that he was keen to see and that the Opposition sought to reduce to five. I do intend and wish to bring that back as soon as I possibly can. As to his request on whether the Government will support his private Member’s Bill, I actually do not know the answer to that yet, but I am very happy to meet him and discuss it.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Not all heroes wear capes—indeed, some of them wear aprons. I want to tell the House about David Jones, who has a butcher’s shop in Earlsheaton in my constituency, and has offered to provide any families who are struggling at Christmas because of universal credit with some food in order to see them through. He says that what he has seen is cruel and barbaric, because, despite Government assurances, people are going into his shop who have nothing—they have no money and they are forced to rely on food banks. Could we have an urgent debate on this?

Can I also repeat my plea of last year for all Members and staff of this House to include in their “out of office” messages for constituents the numbers for the Samaritans and other helpful organisations? This can be a very, very difficult time of year for many people, who sometimes turn to their MP as a last resort, so can we at least signpost them towards help while we are away.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady makes a really good point. I am sure that most hon. Members have helpful numbers for constituents to call—I certainly do, and also an emergency number to get hold of me as their local MP. I absolutely pay tribute to her for raising that. It is a very good idea.

I would also like to thank David Jones for his efforts, and all those who give so generously to contribute to, or indeed run, food banks. It is a fantastic contribution by our communities to those who are vulnerable. The hon. Lady will appreciate that we are seeking to ensure that nobody has to wait to receive money under universal credit. There is now a new contract with Citizens Advice to deliver universal support to make sure that everybody who is applying for universal credit can do so easily. As the Government have said, we continue to look at this roll-out, which is why we are doing it very slowly, but nevertheless I think we are making progress. It will be a very significant improvement on the legacy benefits system.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): At the last Transport questions, I raised the vexed issue of Crossrail funding and did not get a very satisfactory answer. We have now heard that the Department for Transport is loaning the Mayor of London £1.3 billion, which has to be repaid, in addition to the £300 million provided in the summer. Worse still, this vital infrastructure project for London and the south-east has no opening date. Could we have a statement from the Secretary of State next week on what is happening and what controls will be imposed, so that the Mayor of London gets on and delivers this vital project?

Andrea Leadsom: I agree with my hon. Friend; that is a vital project. We have Transport questions on 10 January, and it would be appropriate to raise that then.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be aware that managed migration to universal credit is due to start in July 2019. The proposed regulations state that if claimants fail to make their claim by the deadline plus an extra month’s grace period, they will lose entitlement to transitional protections, which will put vulnerable people at huge risk. May we have an urgent debate, so that we can further review that aspect of managed migration and ensure that the least well-off and the most vulnerable in society are protected from these changes?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the application process for universal credit is much simpler and it is designed to help people get into work and then keep more of their benefits as they increase their hours. Having listened carefully to views expressed in the House, we have increased advances to up to 100% of the first full monthly payment, scrapped the seven days’ waiting, so that everybody can get their money on the same day, should that be necessary, and introduced a two-week overlap with housing benefit payments. Unfortunately, his party voted against those changes.

In the most recent Budget, we increased the amount that someone can earn before their universal credit is reduced, introduced a two-week overlap with various legacy benefits for a smoother transition and gave all self-employed people 12 months to get their business off the ground. That demonstrates a Government who are listening but, at the same time, are committed to rolling out a much better benefit than the ones it replaces.

The Prime Minister has said that she is going to the EU to secure significant and supposedly game-changing amendments to the withdrawal agreement. Will the Leader of the House assure us that we will get a full debate when that agreement comes back and will not just continue with the debate as we left it? Given how over-subscribed that debate was, can she assure us that the debate will last longer than five days?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank my hon. Friend; his approach is exactly right. Even if he did not support the Prime Minister, she won by a clear majority, and it is right that he now supports her.

My hon. Friend asks what the guaranteed length of time for debate will be. He will appreciate that that decision depends on what the Prime Minister comes back with. She is seeking significant reassurances, so that she can bring back a withdrawal agreement that the House will support. It is not possible to set out the exact terms of resumption of the debate or, indeed, the terms of an entirely new debate until we see what the Prime Minister is able to bring back. We are certain that the debate and the vote will come back to the House by 21 January, and that time will be given for all Members to make a contribution to it.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents and the country are crying out for certainty. Will the Leader of the House commit to amend our recess time and have the House sit before Christmas and/or from 2 January, if necessary, so that we can rule out a reckless no-deal Brexit? We urgently need to stop the contingency plans for our NHS, other public services and businesses right across the country being triggered, because it will cost our country millions of pounds.

Andrea Leadsom: I fully understand the hon. Lady’s concerns. She will understand that the legal position at present is that, in the event that there was no agreement on our withdrawal and potentially the political declaration between now and the end of March 2019, the UK would leave the EU without a deal. It is right—[Interruption.] The hon. Lady is shouting back at me, but I hope she will hear me out. It is vital that any Government make preparations for all outcomes. That is the right thing to do, in the country’s interests. It would be wrong of us to assume that a deal will be forthcoming and therefore to put down our preparations. We will continue to prepare for all outcomes, including no deal.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): MidKent College in my constituency has recently had a good Ofsted report. It has played its part—it is at the heart of the local community—in creating over 20,000 apprenticeships since 2010. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the college? May we have a debate on further education colleges and apprenticeships?

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating his further education college. It is absolutely vital that more young people are able to develop the skills they need to get the well-paid jobs of the future. We are transforming technical education through T-levels, and we will be investing an extra £500 million a year once they are up and running. That will build on our apprenticeship programme, which is creating 3 million quality apprenticeships that will change the lives of young people, giving them the skills they need for the future.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): A constituent of mine was convinced to invest her life savings of £150,000—all of it has gone. When she threatened to take action against the PlusOption Trading company, it simply offered her a bonus payment to invest even more. It has ignored three letters from me. Further to the Leader of the House’s answer to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), may we have a Government statement on, and an investigation by the Financial Conduct Authority into, disgraceful companies such as that?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises what sounds like a very concerning case. I encourage her to write on behalf of her constituent directly to the FCA, which, as she will know, is independent of Government.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): A constituent has pointed out to me that the local government ombudsman will look only at cases that have a direct impact on a particular individual rather than taxpayers in general. He raised an issue about Staffordshire County Council, which I believe is very well run, but we need to have confidence in the decisions made in investigations by councils into their own activities. May we have a debate on setting up an independent arbiter or body that can look at the decisions made by county councils or other councils that are not subject to the local government ombudsman in order to give credibility to the decisions of local government?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises an issue that I am sure many hon. Members will have found concerning broader criticisms of the way in which councils go about their business. I am very sympathetic to him, and
he may well want to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can discuss with a Minister the specifics of Staffordshire’s councils.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): This morning, I received a letter from the Minister for Immigration, thanking me for my email correspondence of 5 February about a previous letter of 22 December 2017. May we have a debate about incompetence in the Home Office? I was raising a very serious matter about the delay in granting indefinite leave to remain to Sri Lankans who have sought political asylum and the impact on their ability to contribute to the UK. It is absolutely and woefully inadequate that I have had to wait almost a year to get any kind of response from the Minister of State. Actually, the Minister of State has changed in that time, and the response is still inadequate.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am genuinely sorry to hear of the hon. Lady’s experience. She will recognise that correspondence units in each Department have turnaround times. That sounds like a very bad experience, so if she would like to send me the details, I will take it up with the Department on her behalf.

**Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): I am sure the Leader of the House will be as pleased as I am that Rugby is delivering new homes at three times the national rate—it currently has 17 sites for homebuyers to choose from—but the Heart of England Co-op has chosen to push ahead with an application to develop a well-established recreation area at Oakfield, in a part of the town with limited facilities, against the wishes of the local community. May we therefore have a debate about the value of retaining open spaces so that young people can enjoy the great outdoors?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sympathetic to my hon. Friend; as constituency MPs we all have to find a balance between meeting housing needs and protecting the green and outdoor spaces around us. The national planning policy framework was updated in July, and it safeguards existing recreation areas unless there is clear evidence that the loss can be justified. As my hon. Friend knows, the planning system is locally led, so I hope that his planning authority has taken into consideration strongly held views about the recreation area in Oakfield.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The Government have faced repeated calls from Labour Members to bring privatised probation services back under public control. Following the shocking news that the largest private provider of probation services, Interserve, needs a bail-out, it continues to be awarded Government contracts, so may we please have an urgent debate about the future of privatised probation services?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady takes a significant interest in this issue, so she will know that Justice questions are next Tuesday, at which she might want to raise the matter. It is vital that offenders are properly supervised, and our reforms mean that up to 40,000 more offenders are being monitored than was previously the case. She raises an important issue, and I encourage her to take it up with Ministers.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Two days ago at the TechFest STEM in the Pipeline schools BP challenge in Aberdeen, students from schools across north-east Scotland battled it out to develop an ideal oilfield development plan for a fictional North sea oilfield. I am delighted to report to the House that I am sure is an eager House, that a team from Westhill Academy in my constituency won the Maximising Economic Recovery accolade. Will my right hon. Friend join me not only in congratulating the staff and pupils involved, but in considering what more the Government can do to encourage more young people to get involved in STEM subjects in an engaging and exciting way?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating students at Westhill Academy. As energy Minister I had the chance to take part in a survival challenge in Scotland, before going out to an offshore oil rig; perhaps my hon. Friend could think about offering such a prize to some of those students. They would get in a pretend helicopter and be dropped from the roof upside down into a swimming pool—it is definitely exciting. He is right to point out the Government’s commitment to improving STEM subjects. The Government fund a number of programmes that aim to inspire more young people to study science subjects, such as the STEM Ambassadors programme and the CREST Awards, which encourage students to do STEM-related projects. I congratulate them all on their prizes.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Yesterday, the Conservative party lost any ounce of credibility in leading investigations into sexual harassment and bullying in this place when it restored the Whip to the hon. Members for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and for Burton (Andrew Griffiths). I am afraid it is thoroughly implausible that those investigations just so happened to conclude yesterday. How can we be assured that party politics are taken out of investigations into such allegations, and out of crucial appointments to committees that govern standards and privileges in this House?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady will be aware that the Conservative party lost any ounce of credibility in leading investigations into sexual harassment and bullying in this place when it restored the Whip to the hon. Members for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) and for Burton (Andrew Griffiths). I am afraid it is thoroughly implausible that those investigations just so happened to conclude yesterday. How can we be assured that party politics are taken out of investigations into such allegations, and out of crucial appointments to committees that govern standards and privileges in this House?

**Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My constituent, Marion Finch of Muirkirk, had a lifetime disability living allowance higher rate award, yet when she was reassessed for the personal independence payment she was given only the standard mobility rate. While fighting the system her health deteriorated and, tragically, she died. Her husband is convinced that stress was a contributor to that, and on a point of principle he appealed the decision, which was then overturned. Will the Leader of the House, on behalf of the Government, offer an apology to Mr Finch, and speak to her Cabinet colleagues about the real effects of the Government’s welfare policy?
Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab): I am so sorry to steal the hon. Member’s thunder. I thought she might be pleased with that news, but she has another challenge for me. As I have said, and as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Mr Lidington), said: at the very latest by 21 January.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Scotland’s Government are on a bit of a roll at the moment, with legal victories in the Supreme Courts across Europe against the British Government in the midst of the Brexit chaos. This morning, the United Kingdom Supreme Court ruled that Scotland’s Parliament had the competence to pass its Brexit continuity Bill at the time that it did, and that Scotland’s chief Law Officer, the Lord Advocate, gave the correct advice and that the Presiding Officer of the Holyrood Parliament was wrong in this respect. However, what has happened is that retrospectively, the Leader of the House seek to engage with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so that we can have a statement or correspondence on what we can do to safeguard this crucial highly sophisticated and highly skilled centre for locomotive repair and overhaul in Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: I am genuinely sorry to hear about the threatened closure of that plant. I encourage the hon. Gentleman to seek an urgent Adjournment debate, so that he can raise the issue directly with Ministers.

Andrea Leadsom: May I say how sorry we all are to hear of the loss of the hon. Gentleman’s constituent? It is always incredibly tragic for somebody whose health is deteriorating to then pass on. Our sympathies go to her widower. The Government seek at all times to improve the lives of people with disabilities. Since 2010, more money has been going into supporting those with disabilities to get into work and improve their lives than ever before. It is vital that we continue to do everything we can to improve people’s lives.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): As the Leader of the House knows, the Committee on Standards published a report this week recommending some quick wins that we could implement on the way to full implementation of the Laura Cox report recommendations, without prejudice to longer-term improvements. Will the Leader make time for a debate on that report and its recommendations, and a vote on the recommendations that we make and that the House will need to endorse?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her comments on this matter. She is absolutely correct that the Leader of the House seek to engage with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, so that we can have a statement or correspondence on what we can do to safeguard this crucial highly sophisticated and highly skilled centre for locomotive repair and overhaul in Scotland?

Andrea Leadsom: I share the hon. Lady’s enormous concern for the plight of the Rohingya people. It is absolutely appalling what is going on.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): A UN report and space satellite images show that 1 million Uighur Muslims are in a mass internment camp where they are forced to undergo psychological indoctrination programmes. More recent reports show the widespread use of torture for those who resist. May I ask the Leader of the House to ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on what action our Government are taking with regard to this matter, or is it going to be business as usual where we do not want to upset powerful countries?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sorry. I apologise to the hon. Lady. I heard Rohingya. I do apologise. Mr Speaker, may I ask the hon. Lady to repeat her question?

Yasmin Qureshi: A UN report and space satellite images show that 1 million Uighur Muslims are in a mass internment camp where they are forced to undergo psychological indoctrination programmes. More recent reports show that those who resist are subjected to widespread torture. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to come to this House to make a statement on what action our Government are taking in relation to this situation, or is it going to be business as usual where we never want to criticise a powerful country?

Andrea Leadsom: My sincere apologies to the hon. Lady for mishearing her the first time round. She is raising an incredibly important point. We have all been horrified to hear the stories of what is going on. We have International Development questions on Wednesday 9 January—[Interruption.] I certainly absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that it is vital that we do all we can in this country, and if she would like to email me, I can take this up directly with the Foreign Office.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Scotland’s parliamentarians and Scotland’s Government are on a bit of a roll at the moment, with legal victories in the Supreme Courts across Europe against the British Government in the midst of the Brexit chaos. This morning, the United Kingdom Supreme Court ruled that the Scottish Parliament had the competence to pass its Brexit continuity Bill at the time that it did, and that Scotland’s chief Law Officer, the Lord Advocate, gave the correct advice and that the Presiding Officer of the Holyrood Parliament was wrong in this respect. However, what has happened is that retrospectively,
through House of Lords amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 here, the will of the Scottish Parliament has been thwarted: Can we have a debate about how it is ridiculous to say that Scotland has the most powerful devolved Parliament in the world and about how the only way to protect people in Scotland and the Scottish legal system from the folly of this Tory Government is independence?

Andrea Leadsom: I think the hon. and learned Lady may have just asked that question of the Attorney General, which would have been the more appropriate place—[Interruption.] Okay, well, perhaps she should have asked the Attorney General if she wanted the Law Officers’ advice on that. The answer that I would give is simply to remind her that Scotland is a part of the United Kingdom. It voted very recently to remain a part of the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom entered the European Community together and we will be leaving the European Union together.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The Leader of the House obviously does not expect the Prime Minister to get a meaningful concession in Brussels, because otherwise we would have a meaningful vote next week. While the chaos has been happening on the Government’s side of the House, will she join me in paying tribute to the outgoing First Minister in Wales, Carwyn Jones, and the new Welsh Labour First Minister, Mark Drakeford? Does she perhaps concede that we need to take some lessons in strong and stable Government from the Welsh Labour Government, who have delivered real changes for my constituents, including new schools, new hospitals, new further education colleges and real differences in public services? That is what happens when we have a Government focused on what matters to people, rather than one who are focused on the chaos on the other side.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in thanking the outgoing First Minister for his service to the people of Wales and congratulate and wish him all the best to Mark Drakeford, who is taking over. As to the other points that he raises, I am a huge, huge fan of Wales and all the amazing achievements of Welsh food producers, Welsh creators and Welsh farming communities, as well as the amazing culture and the wonderful walks, but less so of the Welsh Government—he will forgive me for making that point.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Yesterday, I learned that another brilliant live music venue, Gwdihw, in my constituency and other long-standing local businesses are being forced to close to make way for unnecessary commercial development. Can we have a debate on what additional measures are needed across the UK to protect cultural assets against the threat of greedy developers?

Andrea Leadsom: I hope that the hon. Lady took the opportunity to raise that at Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions, which we just had. She will be aware that the Government do everything that we can to support thriving arts and culture right across the UK and that many of our towns are undergoing quite some change, because of the reduced footprint and the way that people are shopping differently, online and so on. The Government are doing what we can by reducing business rates and by encouraging thriving arts and culture. With regards to the specific issue that she raises, she might want to seek an Adjournment debate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Cuba is undergoing a process to adopt a new constitution in February 2019. Unfortunately, freedom of religion and belief protections in the draft constitution have been deliberately weakened, and according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide, some church leaders who have been standing up for stronger freedom of religious belief provisions have been threatened by the Cuban Government. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or a debate on this very pressing issue?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman often raises the suppression of religious freedom and is absolutely right to do so. He will be aware that the Government entirely support the rights of all individuals to express their religious preferences. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the matter with Ministers.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted about “Erskine May” being online, not least because when I called for that on 2 November 2017, both you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House were ever so slightly snippy about the very idea. I am absolutely delighted that we are united in wanting it online.

It is preposterous for us to delay endlessly the vote on Brexit. If we bump up against 21 January, businesses in this country will be wasting time, energy and money worrying about whether there will be a no-deal situation. We need to get on with it. I say this to the Leader of the House: please ditch all next week’s business. Let us get on with the debate and get on with making a decision. That is what Parliament is for—decisions.

Andrea Leadsom: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman is delighted. I do not think Mr Speaker or I were snippy.

On the hon. Gentleman’s main point on the meaningful vote, when hon. Members look at themselves in the mirror, they know full well that the country needs a decision to support a withdrawal agreement. We were looking at a decision not to support a meaningful vote. That is precisely why the Prime Minister decided that we would not go ahead with the vote—she was concerned that hon. Members would not support the withdrawal agreement. If the hon. Gentleman wants to come forward with a worked-out and negotiable alternative, that would be great, but the reality is that the Opposition have no alternatives to suggest. All they want to do is have a vote so that they can vote no. The Prime Minister, in the interests of the country, is trying to find a withdrawal agreement that the House will support.

Mr Speaker: Naturally I reject the accusation that there was any sninness in my attitude. The Leader of the House can answer for herself and has already done so. My recollection is that the House was advised that “Erskine May” was already available to Members online. In so far as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), leading the charge for progressive change, was making the argument that it should be more widely
available online, I am happy to accept that. If that
bushes the hon. Gentleman’s credentials as a champion
of progressive change and brings some happiness into
his heart, that is a double benefit.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): In
my meeting with the Minister for Disabled People,
Health and Work, she stated that Department for
Work and Pensions auditors of health assessment
reports offer recommendations only, but the independent
assessment service told me that the auditor has the
authority to overrule report justifications. In my constituent’s
case, the auditors instructed that changes be made. May
we have a debate in Government time to enable Ministers
to explain these differences to the House?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will be aware that
we have DWP questions on the first day back on
7 January, when I am sure Ministers will be able to
explain that to her.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): As one of the 164 MPs
who were called last week—I was called a little after
midnight last Tuesday—I am very concerned by the
suspension of the vote, not least because the Brexit
Secretary might change again by the time we get to it. I
tell the Leader of the House that kicking the can down
the road is not a strategy for government, and that
waiting for the sword of Damocles to fall on people’s
homes, businesses and livelihoods, and our NHS, is
completely unacceptable. She is deliberately pursuing a
policy of running down the clock and spending taxpayers’
money in order to blackmail Parliament into supporting
her deal. I tell her now that it will not work.

Andrea Leadsom: I ask you, Mr Speaker, whether
accusing me of blackmailing the House is parliamentary
language.

Mr Speaker: Yes, nothing disorderly has occurred
because, if there were a suspicion of disorderly behaviour,
I feel sure that I would have been advised thus. I think
that the essential point was of a political character. I do
not think anybody is making any allegation that would,
if you like, detract from the right hon. Lady’s honour or
be an imputation of dishonesty, because I feel sure that
senior Clerks would have advised me. I think the essential
charge was a political one, to which I am sure the
Leader of the House is capable of responding.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker.
The hon. Lady will realise that—as I have just said to the
hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant)—had we
gone ahead with the vote, the House would have been
very unlikely to support the withdrawal agreement as it
stood. She says that in not holding the vote we are
running down the clock. The point is that the Prime
Minister listened to the views of the House, and has
now gone away urgently to seek changes which will
mean that the House can support the agreement—in
other words, so that she can put to the House something
that it will support in the interests of the country. It is
not in the interests of the United Kingdom for the
House to have a vote on something that the House does
not accept. That is what would create the uncertainty
about which the hon. Lady is concerned.

Mr Speaker: Order. It is an important point, colleagues,
that was raised by the Leader of the House quizzically
with me, and I have been confirmed in my sense that it
was a metaphorical use of the term, and when I say I
have been confirmed in that sense, I mean that I have
been confirmed in that sense by professional advice of
the highest order. So no impropriety has occurred. I
have no objection to being asked whether there was an
impropriety, but there was no impropriety at all.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Following the news this week about Interserve, the
previous collapse of Carillion and the repeated failures
of Capita, will the Leader of the House arrange for a
Minister from the Cabinet Office to come and make a
statement about the functions of the Crown Representative
system, which is meant to be the link between Government
and strategic suppliers? When we see these large companies
failing to fulfil their contracts, something is clearly not
working in the scrutiny process.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised a
really important point. After the collapse of Carillion,
it was clear that the Government wanted to carry out
further reviews to ensure that public service provision
and taxpayers’ money were protected at all times, and
they have taken a number of steps to achieve that. As
the hon. Gentleman will know, Cabinet Office questions
will take place next Wednesday, and I encourage him to
raise the matter with Ministers then.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is welcome
that the immigration Bill is finally to be published, but
when will we have a chance to debate it? My constituent
Robert Makutsa is stuck in interminable legal processes
as the Government try to deport him through their
hostile environment policy, although his wife is a UK
citizen and he makes a valuable contribution to music
and sound engineering in Glasgow. Will the Leader of
the House ask the Immigration Minister to grant him
leave, and when exactly will the Bill be debated so that
we can seek to amend and reform this hostile immigration
policy?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman has raised an
important constituency issue to which I am extremely
sympathetic, and I applaud him for doing so, but I do
not accept that the Home Office is employing a hostile
environment policy. My right hon. Friend the Home
Secretary is trying hard to change any sense that there is
an unwelcoming approach to new migrants or, indeed,
to existing migrants who are seeking the right to remain
here. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to raise the specific
point with me in an email, I can take it up with the
Home Office on his behalf.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): We are in an absurd position.
The Leader of the House is berating Members for not
supporting her Bill, but how can we engage with the Bill
in any way, shape or form unless she brings it to the
House? The Prime Minister has travelled around Europe
this week, she has spoken to numerous leaders of countries,
and she is going to the European Council at the weekend.
There is nothing that she will know after Christmas that
she will not know this weekend. She should bring back
the Bill next week. Will the Leader of the House press
her to do so? If not, she is the Leader of the House: just
bring it back.
Andrea Leadsom: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for attributing such magical powers to me, but, as he will appreciate, I am not able to do such a thing on my own. He talked about a Bill; he means, of course, the withdrawal agreement, and the meaningful vote.

I am not berating Members in any way. Having listened to the views of the House at great length over many weeks, I fully understand and, indeed, share the House’s concerns about, in particular, the prospect of the UK’s being stuck permanently in a backstop that we cannot get out of. However, I think that the House should give the Prime Minister an opportunity to seek amendments so that it can then support the agreement.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): The North East England chamber of commerce is telling me that the uncertainty built into the future partnership framework will cost investment and jobs in the north-east of England, and it has asked me to achieve an outcome that leaves the UK in the single market and customs union, so when will I have a chance to end this business uncertainty by voting against the Prime Minister’s deal and for a public vote that includes an option to stay in the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: It is not Government policy to allow us to do anything other than leave the EU on 29 March 2019, and it is the Government’s policy to do so with a good deal that works for the UK and the EU.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The images of Christmas that are portrayed in advertising and on television are of families coming together, but the reality for many people is that this is a time of great loneliness. Although I appreciate that there is not time for a statement or a debate on the issue of loneliness, may I invite the Leader of the House and you, Mr Speaker, and all hon. Members to join me at the Samaritans reception on Monday at 4 o’clock in the Thames pavilion where we will be launching a report on loneliness, particularly among young people? Last year 1,660 young people took their own lives, and it is time that we recognised the epidemic that is loneliness in this country.

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. She is right to raise this issue. Loneliness is an appalling scourge; whether for a young person at home with a new baby or somebody older who has perhaps been bereaved, it is absolutely appalling. We now have the first ever Minister for loneliness, as she will appreciate, and the Government are committed to a proper strategy for tackling this problem. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising the Samaritans reception next week.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Following on from questions from my hon. Friends, the Prime Minister has been touring Europe this week and will be at the European Council this weekend. The Leader of the House has already announced the business for next week, including that the Prime Minister will make her usual statement after the European Council meeting. So why oh why can we not bring the meaningful vote back next week, since we know that the Prime Minister cannot open up the legal agreement and is merely seeking assurances? Is this not just a scorched earth policy from the Government to bribe Members of this Parliament to vote for a deal that we all know is flawed?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman rightly says that the Prime Minister will make a statement to the House on Monday after the EU Council. He asserts that she will not succeed in her negotiations. The Opposition have asserted all the way through that the Government’s negotiations will not succeed, but an agreement has been negotiated and the Prime Minister is seeking to further improve on it to address the concerns expressed by right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Gentleman will have the opportunity to ask the Prime Minister how that has gone on Monday.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Leader of the House organise a debate in Government time on the planning system? My district council of Stroud has a proud record of delivering the numbers required and has met its five-year plan supply, but under the Government’s new formula there is a massive hike in the number of houses it is expected to provide. Much as we need houses, there must be some fairness in how that system operates, so will the Leader of the House organise a debate?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, we do need many more houses. We have a very good track record: we have delivered over 217,000 new homes in the latest year, which is the highest level in all but one of the last 30 years. That is good news, but there is more to do, and he is right that there needs to be a balance between the needs of those who already live in a community and the needs of those who want a home. He will be aware that local planning is a matter for local authorities, but I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise his local concerns directly with Ministers.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In other news this week, the media have been reporting that Crossrail is about to get a £2 billion bail-out to add to what it has already received—a total of, I think, £17 billion—and that is before we even start with Crossrail 2, which has an earmarked price tag of about £30 billion. The north, meanwhile, is getting nothing like those figures, so may we have a statement from the Transport Secretary on what is going on with the mismanagement and overspending of the Crossrail budget?

Andrea Leadsom: I sympathise with the hon. Lady. She will be aware that we have Transport questions in our first week back, on 10 January, and I encourage her to raise that matter directly with the Secretary of State then.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): As we approach the holiday season, I should like to take this opportunity to wish teachers, staff and pupils a peaceful Christmas. I should also like to give credit to people who will not be with their families over the holiday period because they are helping to keep us safe and secure. May we have a debate in Government time on the role of those volunteers and professionals—people who are just doing their jobs and giving up time for their communities?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this. There are so many people working as volunteers, or doing their duty as police officers, local council workers and so on, who will enable the rest of
us to have a lovely relaxing Christmas, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude. He will be aware that there is a pre-recess Adjournment debate next Thursday, and he might well want to raise the matter again then.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): About a month ago, Royal Mail contacted me to inform me that the Hope Farm Road post office in my constituency would be closing on a temporary basis. It explained the reasons for that and the interim arrangements that would be put in place. Unfortunately, no interim arrangements have materialised and the Post Office appears to have no plan to get it reopened. It is not even replying to my emails now. May we please have a debate on how we can hold this shambolic organisation to account?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am sorry to hear that the hon. Gentleman has had such a bad experience with the Post Office, and he is right to raise the matter here. I think he will probably now get an answer to his question in very short order.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Last week I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on child poverty in the UK. She dismissed my request and said that I was making assertions. She stated: “Just because the hon. Lady makes those assertions, it does not make them true.”—[Official Report, 6 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 1069.]

I am going to try again. May we have a debate on child poverty in the UK? If any MP has any evidence that refutes the evidence given by the Institute for Public Policy Research, the Child Poverty Action Group and the United Nations rapporteur, let them bring that evidence to the debate. Let us have a proper debate on this, and let us find out the truth about child poverty in the UK on her Government’s watch.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I never dismiss the requests of right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Lady did indeed ask for a debate on child poverty, and I merely sought to put right some of her assertions. I would say to her that we now have more children growing up in a home where they see their parents going to work and providing for their family, with 630,000 fewer children living in workless households. The numbers of people and children in absolute poverty are at record lows, with 1 million fewer people and 300,000 fewer children in absolute poverty. Income inequality is also down—it is lower than in any year under the last Labour Government—as the Conservatives have built a fairer and more equal society.

**John Grogan** (Keighley) (Lab): Regarding Europe, is it not now time for those on the two Front Benches to get together, perhaps even with you, Mr Speaker, to offer the House a timetable for the votes that we must have—namely, on the Prime Minister’s deal and, if that falls, on a further referendum, on no deal or on a Norway-style option—so that we can see how the land lies while we still have time to do something about it?

**Andrea Leadsom:** As I have said to a number of right hon. and hon. Members, the meaningful vote will be brought back by 21 January at the latest. Members will know that the Government are under a statutory obligation under section 13(1)(b) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to have the deal approved by a motion in the House, and we will do so just as soon as possible.

**Gavin Newlands** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): A large number of Scottish sports governing bodies have brought to my attention their growing concern regarding sports governance arrangements across the UK. Scottish sports and athletics are being undermined by the decisions and actions of UK bodies—the recent autocratic actions of UK Athletics are a case in point. The all-party parliamentary group on Scottish sport will be having a look at this soon. May we have a debate on the Floor of the House to enable Ministers to hear what Members have to say on this?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I hope that the hon. Gentleman took advantage of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport questions earlier today. I know that sports governing bodies are a matter of huge interest right across this House, and he might well want to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that all hon. Members can take part.
Local Government Funding Settlement

11.49 am

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): With permission, I will make a statement on funding for local authorities in England next year. Every day, councils and the many hard-working, dedicated people who work for them do their communities proud, delivering the essential services on which we all depend and making a difference to every life they touch. It is a privilege to be working with and representing those communities. In doing so, I am determined to ensure that they get the resources and support they need to rise to new opportunities and challenges, to grow their economies and to ensure that there is opportunity for all and that no one is left behind. The draft local government finance settlement being published today is an important step towards that. The provisional local authority funding allocations will be subject to further review before final settlements are made in line with my Department’s usual processes. This provisional settlement confirms that core spending power is forecast to increase from £45.1 billion in 2018-19 to £46.4 billion in 2019-20—a cash increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in the resources available to local authorities.

It has been challenging for councils to drive efficiencies as they have contributed to rebuilding our economy and tackling the deficit that we inherited from Labour. That is why I am delighted that the Budget committed around £1 billion of extra funding for local services, with a strong focus on supporting some of our most vulnerable groups. That includes £650 million for adult and children’s social care in 2019-20. Of that, £240 million will go towards easing winter pressures, with the flexibility to use the remaining £410 million for either adult or children’s services and, where necessary, to relieve demands on the NHS. That is on top of the £240 million announced in October to address winter pressures this year.

In addition, the Budget pledged an extra £84 million over the next five years to expand our children’s social care programmes to support more councils with high or rising numbers of children in care. That builds on the good work my Department is already doing through the troubled families programme to improve all services for families with complex programmes. The Budget also provided a boost for our high streets via a £1.5 billion package of support, including a business rates discount worth almost £900 million and a £675 million future high streets fund to help them adapt and thrive in changing times. In addition, a further £420 million will go towards repairing and improving our roads this year.

I recognise some of the pressures within social care. I have been working with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to address those pressures, and the Government will soon publish a Green Paper on the future of social care. It is a complex issue, and we are working with local authorities to ensure that we get things right. We have taken that approach across the board, listening carefully to councils of all shapes and sizes across the country and responding. My thanks go to my Ministers, especially the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), for all their work. As a result, I can confirm that I will increase the rural services delivery grant by £16 million in 2019-20 to maintain it at last year’s level, recognising the extra costs of providing services in rural communities.

In addition, I am committing up to £20 million to maintain the new homes bonus baseline at 0.4% in 2019-20, to ensure that we continue to reward councils for delivering the homes we need. There will also be no change to the council tax referendum limits set for local authorities in 2018-19, aside from further flexibility offered on the police precept level. Authorities will have the flexibility to increase their core council tax requirement by up to 3% and can draw as needed on the adult social care precept to meet demand for services, but local residents will continue to be protected and be able to approve or veto any excessive rise in a referendum. Measures that I have agreed with the Home Secretary to allow police and crime commissioners to increase the police precept to £24 will help PCCs tackle the changing demands they face.

I am also conscious that so-called negative revenue support grant remains an issue in certain areas. Having consulted on options for addressing it, I am pleased to announce that we intend to directly eliminate the £152.9 million negative RSG in 2019-20 using forgone business rates. That will prevent any local authority from being subject to a downward adjustment to its business rates tariffs and top-ups, which could act as a disincentive to growth.

We have been listening, and we have been acting on what we hear. Nowhere is that more true than when it comes to answering calls from councils, over many years, for more control over the money they raise. Our plan to increase business rates retention to 75% from 2020 provides that and more, giving local authorities powerful incentives to grow their local economy. Under the current scheme, councils estimate that they will receive around £2.4 billion in business rates growth in 2018-19, a significant revenue stream on top of the core settlement funding I am unveiling today. It is therefore no wonder that councils are queuing up to get involved in the pilots we have been running to test the new approach.

I am delighted to announce that, in 2019-20, 15 new pilots will get under way in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, East Sussex, Hertfordshire, Lancashire, Leicestershire, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, North and West Yorkshire, North of Tyne, Solent combined authority, Somerset, Staffordshire and Stoke, West Sussex and Worcestershire. We will also be piloting 75% rates retention in London and continuing the existing pilots in devolution deal areas.

I am also pleased to announce that every authority in England stands to reap the rewards of increased growth in business rates income, which has generated a surplus in the business rates levy account in 2018-19. We propose to distribute £180 million of levy surplus to all councils, based on need.

I am aware that a few authorities continue to undertake significant borrowing for commercial purposes. I share the concerns of the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy and others about the risks to which those local authorities are exposing themselves and local taxpayers. We are considering with Her Majesty’s Treasury what further interventions may be required.
[James Brokenshire]

We are also launching two further consultations today, on reforms to the business rates retention system and on the new approach to distributing funding through the review of relative needs and resources. There is little doubt that the current funding formula needs fixing and replacing with a robust, straightforward approach in which the link between local circumstances and the allocation of resources is clear. With those consultations, we are making important progress towards that and towards a stronger, more sustainable system of local government.

So 2019 is shaping up to be a big moment for local government, drawing together our plans for a new approach to distributing funding and increasing business rates retention, as well as the upcoming spending review. No one knows their local area like councils, which are at the heart of their communities, and we are supporting them to harness their vast local knowledge and networks—yes, to make the best of available resources and to increase efficiency, but also to innovate and improve the way we deliver services. We are working with local authorities to promote efficiency, and we will use that work to develop a package of support to help councils become more efficient and get better service outcomes. We will launch a continuous improvement tool in spring 2019, and we are championing authorities that are putting communities at the heart of service delivery.

The smarter use of technology is clearly pivotal to this work, and it has the potential to be genuinely transformative, which is why the digital declaration launched by the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks), to share and spread best practice is so important. The declaration is backed by a £7.5 million local digital innovation fund, and I am delighted to say that the first successful bidders were announced last week to kick-start projects led by councils to promote service transformation.

There is so much excellent, inspiring work under way in our local communities, and it is right that we get behind it and have faith in the authorities that, day in and day out, always deliver. This settlement and the extra funding announced in the Budget reaffirm that faith, delivering a cash-terms increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in spending for local authorities in 2019-20; delivering extra support for the vulnerable, for service transformation.

11.59 am

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): First, let me thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement. But the real thanks have to go to our councillors, of all political persuasions and none, and to the frontline heroes who, despite almost a decade of austerity, have worked hard to keep our local public services going at the same time as demand has increased and funding has fallen through the floor. The under-resourcing of local government—the sector has lost 60p in every £1 of central Government funding, according to the Tory-led Local Government Association—and the reverse redistribution policies of his Ministry have exacerbated these problems, and he cannot hide from that fact.

Let us bust the myth—this might come as a revelation to the Secretary of State and his Ministers—by pointing out that not all areas are the same. Some areas have greater deprivation and greater poverty, and greater demand for people-based services as a consequence, yet these same areas have fronted the heaviest cuts, and that is continuing—it is not ending. But the Government’s approach, as we have heard here again today, is to shift the burden on to council tax. He knows, and it is an inconvenient truth, that areas such as the one I represent and the one my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) represents cannot bring in anything like the resource from council tax that his own council can bring in, and that widens the inequality across England.

So can the Secretary of State confirm how much of the 2.8% that he has announced, with fanfare, is actually being raised through council tax rather than from central Government funding? Can he confirm that he is recommending an inflation-busting council tax rise this year to local government to plug his Department’s gaps? How will he therefore address the inequality issue whereby revenue support grant is distributed on a needs-based formula, but council tax revenue is collected and spent locally, meaning that the richest parts of this country will be able to raise significantly more than the parts of the country with real deprivation and real demand on public services? Can he confirm that his plans mean a £1.3 billion cut to RSG next year, offsetting the £1.3 billion of spending in his announcement? That really is the reverse redistribution that I talked about.

Does the Secretary of State agree with his official who told the Public Accounts Committee that the sector is sustainable only if it delivers only statutory services? The Secretary of State will know that councils deliver much more than the bare legal minimum—700 or more non-statutory services to be precise. We are talking about Sure Start centres, libraries, parks, museums and investment in youth—all are not included in his assessment of sustainability. So which of those should councils stop providing altogether, if they are to take the advice of his officials? The truth about this statement is that it was actually the worst secret Santa ever, because much of what he has announced today was already announced by the Chancellor in his Budget—there is nothing new here.

On adult social care, we were told by the Tory-led Local Government Association that it needs £1.3 billion next year and £2 billion for children’s services, yet the Secretary of State has re-announced £650 million for both—not only that, but it could be shared with the NHS. How is that going to be split between services for adults, children’s services and the NHS? Can he clarify that? The Secretary of State says he is working with the Health and Social Care Secretary to soon publish the Green Paper on social care. Given the pressures that councils are facing, and the real heartbreak and misery experienced by service users, can he tell us how soon is “soon”? Or is this like the Brexit meaningful vote, whereby no date is ever given? The fact is that social care is in crisis. The promised Green Paper has now been delayed four times and it is more than a year late.
On public health, we have seen this week that health inequalities are widening, with life expectancy going backwards in the poorest parts of the country. After £700 million of cuts to public health budgets, and more cuts to come next year, all falling disproportionately on the poorest areas, why is the Secretary of State not doing more to protect those budgets from being used for what are clearly non-public health projects?

Two years ago on the steps of Downing Street, and again last night, the Prime Minister promised to build a country that works for everyone. At her conference, she promised to end austerity. But is it not the case that Brokenshire today delivered another broken promise? Food bank use has increased to the highest rate on record. Child homelessness has increased to the highest level in recent years. Yesterday, we were told that for the first time since records began, life expectancy has come to a standstill, and in some areas it is falling.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights warned that local authorities have been gutted by a series of Government policies. Although the Secretary of State may wrap up his statement in Christmas paper, when we unwrap the parcel we will still see poorer areas in this country getting poorer. Frankly, that should shame us all.

**James Brokenshire:** I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s comments, but I am disappointed that he has not recognised the increases in spending that were set out in the Budget and that I have underlined, and the fact that I highlighted further spending in today’s statement. To take up his theme, one of my colleagues questioned whether the hon. Gentleman might be the Gwynch that stole Christmas. He should recognise that even in his local area there is Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council, with an extra £5.6 million in core spending; Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council, with an extra £4.5 million in core spending; and Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council, with an extra £3.6 million increase in core spending.

The hon. Gentleman should recognise the context of the work that the Government have done to clear up the mess that we inherited. [Interruption.] No, no—the UK economy has grown for five years, there are 3 million more people in employment since 2010, and manufacturing has grown for its longest period in the past 20 years. I recognise that local government has contributed to the hard work involved in clearing up that mess. We know that the demand on local services has increased. We have recognised that in the statement and will ensure not only that councils have the tools and flexibilities to deliver efficiently and effectively, but that they will have the additional funding that I set out today. We are equipping councils well.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted several points about deprivation. The most deprived authority’s core spending power is 23% higher than that of the least deprived. We take council tax into account in funding and when we look into issues of equalisation. He also highlighted the issue of negative RSG. I addressed clearly and firmly in my statement how that will be dealt with.

On social care and the £650 million, the hon. Gentleman questioned the need for strong integration—strong working between our councils today and our NHS—to deliver quality services. That is profoundly what needs to happen so that we are looking after the most vulnerable in our communities. I am sorry if those on the Opposition Front Bench do not acknowledge or accept that. It is a fact that 93% of local authorities recognise that the better care fund has promoted integration and improved joint working in their area.

This is a statement and settlement that, yes, acknowledges and recognises the pressures on social care, and that there is more work to do in respect of the forthcoming Green Paper and on how we will apply the learning from local government to drive better services. I will continue to be a champion for local government and what it delivers and does in our communities. I am proud to support local government and that positive work within our areas.

**Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con):** Devon has successfully piloted the 100% retention of business rates, and it has injected an additional £20 million into Devon to support local economic growth and public services, but the pilot is due to end in March. Surely the whole point is to continue pilots that are a success. Can the Secretary of State provide any reassurance for Devon as to whether it will be able to continue, because it was not in the list of counties that he mentioned?

**James Brokenshire:** I recognise the challenges and issues over the business rates retention pilots. Not everyone has been successful in relation to the pilots for 2019-20. We are piloting on the basis of 75%. That is on the basis of the new system that is being introduced in 2020 so that we can properly understand how it will operate in practice. I will certainly highlight to my hon. Friend some of the other issues in relation to, for example, the rural services grant, and how that will be beneficial to her local community, but, obviously, we will look at the representations that are received through this provisional settlement.

**Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

The Government’s austerity policies, as we have heard from the Labour Front-Bench spokesman this morning, have been deeply affecting councils in England for many years. I have been in this Chamber listening to debates about the struggles that they have had. Those austerity policies have also hit Scottish finances, but, in contrast, the Scottish National party Government continue to treat local authorities very fairly, despite the fact that the Government have cut the Scottish budget by £2 billion between 2010-11 and 2019-20. There are some warnings from Scotland on match funding and pilots, because this Government also continue to short change local authorities in Scotland directly in other ways by their failure to match the city deal funding from the Scottish Government by £387 million. It is especially critical at this time for Dundee, which faces the prospect of losing 850 Michelin jobs, as the Tay cities deal falls short because the Government have failed to match the Scottish Government’s spending by £50 million.

Mitigating Tory costs for local authorities will cost the Scottish Government £435 million next year. On pilots, the extra administration costs of dealing with the hard-hearted and shambolic roll-out of universal credit has meant that Highland Council, a pilot area, has run up costs of more than £2.5 million, which is directly attributable to the costs of universal credit. The council leader and I have written numerous letters to the Secretary...
of State for Work and Pensions, and the matter has been raised with the Minister for Employment on numerous occasions. The questions are: when will the Secretary of State’s Government reimburse councils such as Highland Council and their tax payers and when will they live up to their responsibility for city deals and make good on their shortfalls?

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I am pleased that he recognises the contribution that city deals have made in Scotland, the contribution that the UK Government are making in Scotland to ensure that that sense of growth and opportunity is felt very firmly, and how we contribute in that way to see that that is felt throughout our United Kingdom. I am sorry that, in some way, he does not fully appreciate and recognise the contribution that we are making. On the point that he makes more broadly in relation to universal credit, obviously, care and attention has been given to this matter by my colleagues, who I am sure will listen to the points that he makes. However, I say to him that the Scottish Government themselves have flexibility over welfare policy and over what they can do to deal with some of the issues and concerns that he has highlighted, and therefore that they have responsibility in that regard.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I welcome the change and elimination of negative revenue support grant; that is most important. Will the Secretary of State confirm also that outer London boroughs such as Bromley will in fact profit as a result of the increases that he has announced, but, when the former is revised, will he also bear in mind the need to take into account those authorities that have a track record of historical efficiency and low cost?

James Brokenshire: As my hon. Friend has highlighted, we do intend to directly eliminate the £152.9 million negative revenue support grant using forgone business rates. That will prevent any local authority from being subject to a downward adjustment to its business rates tariffs and top-ups that could act as a disincentive for growth. I am sure that he will look at the detail of this. Obviously, we have the business rates retention pilots of 75% for London and that long-term sustainable funding arrangement for local government.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): At the time of the Budget, the Local Government Association, of which I am pleased to be a vice-president, welcomed the £650 million extra for social care, but contrasted it very clearly with the funding gap in adult and children’s services of £2.6 billion. That, it said, would lead to more than 1 million people not getting the care they need and, in the LGA’s own words, “threaten other services our communities rely on”—such as libraries, street cleaning and parks. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, for the majority of councils, there is no additional funding in this statement over and above the amounts announced in the Budget, which the LGA described as “inadequate”, and that, for the next financial year, this will mean further cuts and more austerity still being the order of the day for most local councils?

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I welcome the help that the Government are providing for local high streets, and may I urge the Secretary of State to make sure that the new Help for High Streets fund is up and running very soon and is providing help to local town centres in my constituency?

James Brokenshire: We will certainly be doing our utmost to ensure that councils are able to bid into the £675 million, knowing that, yes, there are challenges on our high streets; no one can deny that. There is a need for innovation and a need to see investment going in there, as well as a taskforce that will support that activity, learning and recognising very firmly the recommendations from the Timpson review, which has been of great assistance.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I was really disappointed with the announcement, as it really does nothing to address the growing inequalities across our country. One of the biggest problems, of course, is that much of local government funding is now based on council tax, and council tax is so very unfair. When will the Government revalue properties so that dwellings worth £300,000 in one area are no longer in the same council tax band as dwellings worth £100,000 in another area?

James Brokenshire: I am always sorry to disappoint the hon. Lady, but I will have to do so on that point. However, I can highlight the £3.5 million additional funding from 2018-19 to 2019-20 for Bath and North East Somerset unitary authority. Therefore, we do take account of the differentials in council tax and how grant is applied, and that is very firmly recognised and understood within the system.

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that my constituents in Northumberland will benefit from the increases in the rural services delivery grant, which is a most welcome recognition of the rurality challenges with which our public services have to deal across my vast and very sparsely populated constituency?

James Brokenshire: As I have indicated, we acknowledge some of the real pressures within rural areas—some of the additional costs that come through from that—through the rural services delivery grant. We also acknowledge those pressures through the business rates retention pilot, which I am sure will be of assistance in my hon. Friend’s area.
Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I welcome the announcement of an increase in core spending power but I estimate that it will be worth about £2.5 million in Knowsley. Set against that, however, the Secretary of State will be aware that Knowsley, with some of the highest need in the country, has also shamefully had the biggest cut in support from central Government, at £100 million. Is the Secretary of State not ashamed that need is now almost irrelevant to the allocation of local government funding?

James Brokenshire: I simply do not accept the core issue behind the right hon. Gentleman’s comments. Indeed, we are undertaking the fair funding review, which will allow further reflection on and recognition of some of the pressures that are felt between councils. Knowsley will see an increase of £2.8 million between 2018-19 and 2019-20, which will mean core spending power per dwelling of £2,282.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): To balance, in 2021 Hampshire will have cut a total of £560 million from its budget. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge the difficulties faced by even the best-run councils?

James Brokenshire: I acknowledge the pressures that councils have been experiencing and the hard choices that so many have had to make to deal with the issues with the public finances to which we have had to respond. I hope that my right hon. Friend will recognise the additional funding announced today. Equally, as we head towards the spending review next year, we will look carefully at further efficiencies and opportunities to ensure that councils are sustainable for the long term.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Liverpool City Council and Knowsley Borough Council cover my constituency of Garston and Halewood. Both have been severely hard hit, with more than 60% of their Government grant removed. Will the Secretary of State explain how his announcement will help Liverpool City Council to meet the enormous gaps that have been created as a result of his Government’s policies?

James Brokenshire: The funding and allocations announced today certainly recognise some of the pressures that councils in Liverpool and elsewhere have been facing—for example, with regard to social care issues. It is important that we recognise those pressures and the growth that has been experienced. The additional funding will assist, but long-term reform is needed through the Green Paper and, in relation to the long-term funding situation, through the spending review. That needs to be addressed next year.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Essex County Council and Chelmsford City Council do an excellent job, and the real-terms increase is welcome. However, there are real pressures because the area is growing, with 16,000 new homes due next year. Will the Secretary of State look favourably on our housing infrastructure bid, and will there be another chance for business rates retention projects for those who were not called for this year’s pilot?

James Brokenshire: We are moving to a system in which 75% business rates retention will be the norm around the country. In relation to the housing infrastructure fund, we received a large number of bids worth almost £14 billion to deliver 1.5 million homes back in 2017, and further funding has been committed to that. We are looking carefully at this matter because we want to build the homes that our country needs and get the infrastructure in place to deliver them.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State confirm that local authorities are now housing 82,000 homeless families in temporary accommodation? Can he confirm that that has risen by 5% in the last year and by 71% since 2010, and can he tell us how much it actually costs local authorities?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the pressures of homelessness and temporary accommodation, and we have committed £1.2 billion across the board to respond to and deal with the issue. I am committed to dealing with some of the most acute pressures and issues, including rough sleeping. I want us to move towards a situation in which that is eradicated, and we get people into homes and give them the support they need. That is a clear priority for me.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and his excellent Minister for Local Government, who have given East Sussex County Council a great deal of time and support. I welcome East Sussex being added to the pilot for 75% business rates retention. Using this year’s figures, that will be worth an extra £3.6 million. Does the Secretary of State agree that projects such as the delivery of a new road and business park in East Sussex will mean more money retained by East Sussex, and more jobs and growth in the local economy for my constituents?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the innovation in East Sussex highlighted by my hon. Friend. That is what I see in local government—the real drive and desire to do the right thing for communities, and to see jobs, growth and prosperity. This Government will continue to support that.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Birmingham is reeling from the biggest cuts in local government history—£690 million, with another £86 million to come. Children’s centres are closing, and there have been cuts to school transport for disabled kids and to advice for poor people. The consequences are ever more serious, yet the Secretary of State seems to favour low-need, leafy shires at the expense of the great city of Birmingham. Does he not recognise that this is not a fair deal but a bad deal for the city, and that Birmingham has simply had enough?

James Brokenshire: No, I certainly do not acknowledge the hon. Gentleman’s point. Core spending power per dwelling in Birmingham is around 10% higher than the average. I draw his attention to the extra £18.2 million that he will see through today’s announcements. We want to see the great city of Birmingham continue to thrive and flourish, which is precisely why we are supporting it.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): This year is the last year of the multi-year settlement, so what happens to the 3% of councils that did not sign up to the efficiency savings? How are they treated? More importantly,
what are the Secretary of State's plans for the future of multi-year settlements, so that councils can plan for the future?

James Brokenshire: I firmly recognise the benefit of multi-year settlements. We have seen this through councils' ability to plan and to drive efficiencies and effectiveness. As my Department prepares submissions for next year's spending review, I will reflect carefully on the matter in order to recognise the ability for councils to plan, while also ensuring that we promote innovation.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State understand that there is a limit to back-office efficiency savings and the new income that councils can get? Since 2010, Lambeth has seen some of the biggest cuts of any council in the country. There is a rising demand in inner-city areas that we can do nothing about. Just how does the Secretary of State think that councils can continue to deal with this rising demand with the level of funding that they are receiving?

James Brokenshire: A lot of that demand is in social care pressures, which is why we have made these announcements. Equally, I recognise that there is a need for long-term reform and sustainability to ensure that we can meet the needs of the future. I am firmly discussing that issue with the Health Secretary as we look at the social care Green Paper. Core spending power in Lambeth is also above average for that class of council, but we will continue to reflect on the issue.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for our recent meeting to discuss a further devolution deal for Greater Lincolnshire. In his statement, he referred to promoting efficiency. Does he agree that more resources for frontline services could be released if we created more unitary authorities, and would he welcome such proposals?

James Brokenshire: I want to drive efficiency and effectiveness, and I recognise some of the incredible work that has already been undertaken. My hon. Friend highlights the issues of unitarisation, which we very much want to be locally driven. I will certainly be setting out my further thoughts on the conditions to be satisfied, knowing that there needs to be a unanimity of view or that we seek proposals from particular areas to make it effective.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): In my previous role, I warned Suffolk County Council that reducing services in children's centres would lead to increased numbers of children being taken into care. Does the Secretary of State accept that increase in demand for children's social care is at least partially caused by cuts in preventive services such as children's centres, and will his Department assess the correlation between children's centre cuts and an increase in the number of children taken into care?

James Brokenshire: We are investing in prevention and ways to promote good standards across local authorities. That is why, at the autumn Budget, the Chancellor announced an additional £84 million over five years to work with a number of local authorities that are seeing high or rising demand for children's social care to ensure that they improve their practice and decision making in delivering for those families.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend's announcement, particularly on the rural services delivery grant. There is no doubt that rural counties such as Suffolk do face specific costs. Will he outline specifically what this will mean financially for Suffolk?

James Brokenshire: The Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks), has been highlighting the additional £400,000 for Suffolk in the rural services delivery grant. We are providing £81 million to the most sparsely populated areas in 2019-20, recognising the pressures that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) has highlighted and just how important that is.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is the season of goodwill, and I indicated to the diligent Parliamentary Private Secretary that I would like a copy of the hand-out questions, but I have had to make up my own.

Last week, I met the nursery heads and children's centre leaders in south Bristol. We know that these centres are the greatest, most efficient driver of social mobility in the country. May I therefore invite the Secretary of State to south Bristol to meet those nursery school heads and children's centre leaders to explain how, if they are not part of his assessment on sustainability for local authorities, they fit into the Government's policies on social mobility and increasing skills for our country?

James Brokenshire: I was in Bristol just a few short weeks ago looking at the issue of homelessness, but I recognise the hon. Lady's bid for me to look at some of the other important services and the work going on that is affecting her community. Yes, there are pressures on children's social care—I recognise that, and it has been recognised in today's announcement. I will continue to work with my colleagues at the Department for Education as we look at the spending review and ensure that we have a sustainable system knowing the pressures that are there.

Mr Speaker: In a similarly festive spirit, I can tell the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) that she has brought back fond memories for me, because in 1992 I fought the Bristol South constituency. Unfortunately for me, and probably for the benefit of the nation, the Bristol South constituency fought back.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): You might have been my neighbour, Mr Speaker.

I very much welcome the increase in core spending for Somerset of 3.7% and, in particular, our inclusion in the 75% business rate retention pilot areas, which I and three colleagues from Somerset have worked hard on. I have just had a text from the leader of Somerset County Council saying, "This is excellent news and thank you." Does this not demonstrate that our Ministers are listening, especially the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), and that they have at last realised that rural areas really do need some special attention?
James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and, indeed, to all the Somerset MPs who have highlighted to me some of the specific issues that have been engaged in. I welcome the feedback that she has relayed to the House on how we acknowledge some of the particular pressures in rural areas. It is interesting to note, Mr Speaker, that, by the sound of it, you came very close to going into the Bristol area. However, we will continue to focus on all areas around the country as we look at the spending for councils moving forward.

Mr Speaker: Not that close.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Unfortunately, Liverpool City Council is not very happy with today's news. I listened very closely to the Secretary of State, but he did not mention anything about replacing European funds that will be lost if the Prime Minister's withdrawal agreement passes—whenever that may be. Liverpool City Council has secured £110 million from Europe for various projects over the next few years that is going to be vital in the face of £440 million of cuts since 2010—a 64% cut in real terms that has seen devastating consequences. Will he today commit to replacing those moneys if it turns out that they will be lost?

James Brokenshire: On EU funds, we will be consulting in due course in relation to the UK shared prosperity fund—the UK-wide arrangements that will replace the structural funds. I am sure that the hon. Lady will have the opportunity to make representations on that. I acknowledge, yes, that some funding is received through the existing funds, but there is now the opportunity for the UK to shape this and also to deal with some of the bureaucracy to ensure that more money goes to the frontline.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): My right hon. Friend will know that with the home-grown proposals for the unitary councils of Dorset, we have been at the cutting edge of modernisation and delivering value for money and quality services. Will he say a little more in relation to Dorset, specifically, regarding the outcome of his announcement on negative revenue support grant and the very welcome news about the rural services delivery grant?

James Brokenshire: Negative RSG will be eliminated, as I have indicated. My hon. Friend will see in the different schedules that will be published the implications of the rural services delivery grant. He will also notice, in relation to Dorset, the statutory instrument that has been laid in relation to council tax harmonisation, which I am sure will give him all the clarity he will need for his council for the future.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The battering of Birmingham has been remorseless. In the food banks where I work, demand is up by a third on the past year. In the soup kitchen where I worked on Sunday night, demand was up by 50% on the past year. The rough sleepers I helped to count sleeping on our Sunday night, demand was up by 50% on the past year. In the soup kitchen where I worked on frontline.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I declare my interest as a member of Kettering Borough Council. I thank the Secretary of State for listening to the campaign by local authorities in Northamptonshire and local hon. Members that Northamptonshire be granted a business rates retention pilot. Can he explain in simple terms, for the benefit of my constituents, how this will help local government finance as local councils reorganise in Northamptonshire?

James Brokenshire: I understand that Northamptonshire has estimated that the potential benefit is in the order of £18 million in relation to the business rates retention arrangements, with the growth in business rates. That is the change that we want to see across the system. I recognise the continuing issues and challenges within Northamptonshire. I can certainly commit to my hon. Friend to continue to work with colleagues on this.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council has had to make £170 million of cuts and savings since 2010, yet this year alone we have had a 40% increase in the number of looked-after children, which was unplanned because they have come from the National Crime Agency's historical child sexual exploitation investigation. The £84 million that the Secretary of State cites is actually Department for Education money for innovation, not frontline social work. So exactly how is Rotherham Council meant to look after children on a day-to-day basis?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady is right about the £84 million, which is about driving innovation, and driving good standards and different forms of practice, so that councils can learn from each other in that way. In terms of the core elements of this, I point to the £650 million and the £410 million within it that enables councils to use it for issues such as children's social care, given the issues and pressures that are there. That is why we have responded in this way. Clearly, I acknowledge and recognise the points that she makes. That is why we have made those decisions but, equally, why we will continue to work with councils on this hugely important issue.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): By way of a declaration, I am a member of Medway Council. Conservative-run Medway Council has the lowest council tax in Kent and excellent frontline services, and it has made a real success of the 100% business rates retention scheme. It has now applied for £170 million to build 13,000 houses through the housing infrastructure fund. In the light of its success, will the Secretary of State look at its bid favourably?
James Brokenshire: We are looking at all bids for the housing infrastructure fund. I appreciate the ambition of Medway and other councils to deliver the homes that our constituents need. We are scrutinising those bids so that councils can deliver that. I recognise and appreciate the work that Medway is doing and how it is keeping council tax down.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The National Audit Office says that local government funding will be cut by 56% between 2010 and 2020. My local authority’s funding has been cut by 63%. Last night, there were 948 households in temporary accommodation in Greenwich, and 21,000 children went to sleep in households in poverty. Is that not the reality of Tory austerity, and are those people not paying the price of the consistent cuts that this Government have made to local government funding?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman highlights one element of the local government settlement. However, that does not take account of council tax, business rates retention or the better care fund. In relation to core spending power, I hope he recognises the additional £44 million that Greenwich Council will receive in 2019-20. It is important to look at all the forms of funding that make up the overall finances available to local government to deliver for their areas.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for Local Government for the work they have been doing, and in particular for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire’s inclusion in the 15 business rates retention pilots. Does the Secretary of State agree that that will help the Conservatives on the local authority in Staffordshire’s inclusion in the 15 business rates retention pilots?

James Brokenshire: I congratulate Stoke-on-Trent and commend my hon. Friend on all he does to champion his community. The business rates retention pilots will certainly assist the 15 councils selected, but we want to see that benefit being rolled out to all councils. That is why this will be tested further, as we look to 2020 and beyond, so that other communities can see that positive impact.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): By 2022, Newcastle City Council will have had to save £327 million due to slashed Government funding and rising demand. We see that in the increased litter on our streets, the reduced library opening hours, reduced support for the most vulnerable among us and the terrible choices that Newcastle councillors and council officials have to make. The council is currently consulting on yet further cuts. Will the Secretary of State respond to that consultation and explain why slashed services should be further slashed, now that austerity is supposedly over?

James Brokenshire: First, I hope that the hon. Lady’s voice gets better quickly in time for Christmas. There will be a 75% business rates retention pilot in Newcastle in 2019-20, which will release additional funds to meet some of the pressures that she highlighted, and core spending power will increase further. We must also look at the devolution deals and all the support and investment being provided. I hope she sees the positive things in this statement that will address a number of the points that she highlighted.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): It is very welcome that Leicestershire will see a 4.4% increase in its core spending power next year, and it is extremely welcome that we will get a business rates retention pilot worth £13 million; I thank Ministers for meeting me to discuss that. However, the local government funding formula is opaque and unfair, and Leicestershire is unfairly under-funded. Can the Secretary of State assure me that he will continue to look at a fair funding formula and look closely at the Leicestershire model, for comprehensive reform?

James Brokenshire: I thank my hon. Friend for his active participation in our work on long-term funding and the fair funding review, and I thank Leicestershire for its participation in and support for that. He highlighted some of the announcements today, including the benefit of around £14 million for Leicestershire. He has been a good and active champion. We want people to be engaged in the fair funding review, to ensure that we learn from the evidence, so that we get this right.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): After the Budget statement, 76 council leaders, including the Mayor of Bristol, wrote to the Secretary of State warning that more money was needed to avoid a “catastrophic collapse” in key council services. Does he really think that those 76 council leaders will be reassured by what they have heard today?

James Brokenshire: Those council leaders should recognise the additional funding being allocated to councils up and down the country, but I know that further innovation, support and discussions are required. In terms of the spending review next year and the long-term arrangements, I want to see a sustainable future for our local councils and the delivery of services in the hon. Lady’s constituency and elsewhere. I am determined to deliver that.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement, and in particular the funding and clarity provided on two issues for district councils that have an agenda for growth, such as Rugby Borough Council. First, he has retained the threshold on the new homes bonus, which will continue to provide an incentive for councils to grant planning consent for homes. Secondly, he has eliminated the negative revenue support grant, which was a particular concern to many district councils, meaning that councils will continue to have an incentive to provide business growth.

James Brokenshire: I know that my hon. Friend is a champion of district councils, and I commend him for all his work. As I said in my statement, I hope there will be recognition that we have listened on a number of issues, including negative RSG and the new homes bonus. This is a settlement that councils can get behind, so that they can get on and deliver for their local communities.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for allowing Stoke and Staffordshire to be in the business rates pilot. It is late—it should have been last year—but it is welcome.
However, I remain confused. When I wrote to the Conservative leadership at Stoke-on-Trent City Council last February about their increase in revenue support grant, they told me that it was an ineffective measure of their spending ability and that they will still have to make severe cuts in their budget. Who is right—the Conservatives at the council who tell me their budget is still being squeezed, or the Conservatives in Parliament who tell me that spending has never been greater?

**James Brokenshire:** I would highlight the additional core spending power of £3.9 million that will be delivered for Stoke-on-Trent. I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s recognition of the inclusion of those areas in the business rates retention pilots. The point is that councils can look to a number of different funding streams for the delivery of their services, including direct grants, business rates retention and council tax. We look at the funding that councils are delivering for their communities in that overall context.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), the £84 million for children’s services is over five years, which means it is only £16 million a year. The £410 million is to be shared between adults, the NHS and children’s services, yet in County Durham the number of children looked after has risen by 300 to more than 800, which means an extra £7 million a year. Will the Secretary of State acknowledge that his increases are inadequate, and that he needs to go back to the Treasury to ask for more?

**James Brokenshire:** I certainly recognise the pressures that councils have experienced in relation to children’s social care as well as adult social care. That is why there is flexibility for councils to determine how the £410 million is allocated between each of the pressures they are experiencing. Durham unitary authority will see an extra £13.1 million in 2019-20. The £84 million is spread over five years. It is about a sense of innovation and driving up standards. I certainly commit to continuing to work with colleagues in the Department for Education on these issues, and I recognise the pressures and the need for continued innovation in preparation for the spending review.

**Dr Paul Williams** (Stockton South) (Lab): The cuts to the public health ring fence—£1 million has been lost in Stockton-on-Tees in the past two years—mean health visitors with unsustainable case loads and sexual health services under increased pressure. What guarantees does this settlement give that there will be increased public health investment in our most disadvantaged communities?

**James Brokenshire:** Within the social care element, there is obviously a focus on taking pressure off the NHS—how social care in the NHS goes hand in hand. I am a profound advocate for the prevention agenda that my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary has advanced. I certainly commit to continuing to work with him to ensure that we focus on the delivery of the prevention agenda in local communities. That obviously involves public health, and we are therefore seeing fewer people going into hospital. We are delivering the sort of system that actually makes sense and ensures we take pressure off our NHS.

**Liz McInnes** (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): Rochdale Council has had to make £178 million of cuts since 2010 due to cuts in central Government funding. The latest cuts are to the grants for our community centres. Does the Secretary of State think it is an efficient use of council funds to cut these much-needed community centres?

**James Brokenshire:** Clearly, it is for individual councils to make their decisions. I gently remind the hon. Lady that these changes have had to be made to deal with pressures in the public finances, and that councils have had to make hard decisions because of the bigger macro issues we have had to deal with. However, I hope that she will recognise the increase in core spending power that Rochdale will see from the announcement I have made today. I encourage councils to do all that they can through local decision making, knowing that, yes, changes have had to be made, and that is a consequence of some of the implications we have had to pick up as a Government.

**Mr Jim Cunningham** (Coventry South) (Lab): Over the past eight years, Coventry City Council has lost well over £100 million in resources from the Government. It faces pressures on children’s services, youth services and social care—and it is about time we had the Green Paper on social care. It would have been more welcome if we had been able to look at the overall picture and could ask questions now about the police precept, so that we could make a judgment about the 2.8% increase in cash terms. We would then have got a better judgment because, under the guise of local democracy, the Government are shoving their responsibilities for funding local services on to local authorities. Local authorities will then get discredited, and in three or four years’ time the Secretary of State will come along and talk about capping profligate local authorities. He needs to get real for a change.

**James Brokenshire:** I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that he will have an opportunity during the statement to follow to raise any questions about policing—or about what I have said today about flexibility on the police precept—with the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, who has just joined me on the Front Bench. I am sure my hon. Friend listened very carefully to what the hon. Gentleman said. This is about providing our police with additional funding to meet their needs and those of local communities, and such flexibility is one of the means of doing so.

**Dr David Drew** (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the point raised by the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers)—my hon. Friend in this respect—will the Secretary of State, given the reputed back-office and other savings produced by the move to unitary authorities, look at setting up a fund to encourage the remaining parts of the country at least to consider doing so as the way forward in really making local government work in those areas?

**James Brokenshire:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the approach he has outlined. Certainly, as we look to the spending review and to different ways in which we can drive further innovation, we will consider how unitarisation has brought benefits to some parts of the
country in producing savings on back-office and other arrangements. We do want that to be locally driven and for there to be such support for it, but he makes an interesting suggestion and I will certainly reflect on it further.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In the Secretary of State’s statement, he said that he has been “listening carefully to councils of all shapes and sizes across the country and responding.”

May I therefore ask him how exactly the £650 million for adult and children’s services, and apparently for the NHS as well, will deal with the national funding crisis now—I repeat, now—in adult social care and children’s services, which is currently estimated to be about £3 billion?

James Brokenshire: With the additional funding announced in the Budget, the Government will have given councils access to £10 billion of dedicated funding that can be used for adult social care in the three-year period to 2019-20. I know that longer-term reforms are obviously required to put the system on a sustainable basis. That is why we have now gained the £650 million to support councils in dealing with a number of these pressures. Again, I highlight how we deliver care and support better by having stronger linkages between our NHS and our council services, which this will help drive.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): For two weeks running, I have asked the Prime Minister about the devastating funding challenges that the Tyne and Wear fire and rescue service is facing. I know she has been a bit busy, so she may not have had time to have a word with the Secretary of State. In the light of the fact that funding local services such as social care, fire services and the police through the council tax precept just does not work in areas such as mine, as he well knows, and that the reserves have already been allocated, how does he propose to fill these drastic funding gaps?

James Brokenshire: I would be pleased to discuss this further with the hon. Lady. I would highlight that, overall, fire and rescue services will receive about £2.3 billion in 2019-20. She talked about the reserves. Certainly, the financial reserves held by single-purpose fire and rescue authorities increased by over 80%—to £545 million—between 31 March 2011 and 31 March 2018, which is equivalent to 42% of their core spending power. However, I will certainly reflect further on the points the hon. Lady has made, and I look forward to discussing them with her.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): For the past eight years, the Government have in effect outsourced the hardest decisions on the most severe cuts to the most deprived local authorities. It is just not fair on a city such as Manchester, where, in the eight years to 2020, we will see a £600 per household cut in funding. Is it not true that austerity will never be over until we have not only the sticking plaster that the Government are implementing in relation to these cuts, but some proper funding restored to the most deprived authorities in this country?

James Brokenshire: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that this has been about the empowerment of Manchester. It is about Manchester getting more of the benefits and more of the decision making, with devolution arrangements worth about £7 billion, which my hon. Friends on the Front Bench have highlighted. As I hope the hon. Gentleman will see from the details of the information published on the settlement, there is an extra £11.8 million for Manchester in 2019-20—an extra amount of that sum—to support services in that great city.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): The modus operandi of this Government—whether we are talking about the police, fire services or, as today, local government—is to smash financial support for public authorities and, when they are unable to deliver services, to attack them politically for increasing the council tax. Since most of the additional spending power the Secretary of State is announcing today will come from the local authorities themselves, does he plan to use the same tactic in this funding round?

James Brokenshire: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that I am a proud champion of local government. I celebrate the incredible work that our councils do up and down the country, and the local government officers and staff who work tirelessly for the benefit of our communities. As we look to the future, I will continue to underline that message about the positive things councils do in transforming communities and the life chances that they deliver. Rather than knocking that, I will be supporting and celebrating it.
Police Funding Settlement

12.59 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to propose to the House a provisional police funding settlement for 2019-20. I do so at a time of real pressure on our police system, with demand rising and becoming increasingly complex and resource intensive. Across the country, police officers and staff are working exceptionally hard in demanding and often risky conditions. They have the respect and thanks of this House, but they need more than that—they need additional support to help them do their job.

Last year, Parliament approved a funding settlement that resulted in £460 million of additional public investment in policing, including £50 million more for counter-terrorism and £280 million more for local forces from the precept. That meant that every force’s funding was protected in real terms this year, and overall public investment in policing this year is more than £1 billion higher than three years ago. As a result of last year’s settlement, most police and crime commissioners set out plans to either protect or enhance frontline policing. I also indicated last year that our intention was to provide a similar settlement in 2019-20, subject to improved efficiency, productivity and financial transparency. I am pleased to confirm that the police have met those conditions, and there is an agreed plan to deliver £120 million in commercial and back-office savings by 2020-21. Forces are developing digital plans, including deploying mobile technology more ambitiously to use police time more productively, and every police and crime commissioner has published a financial reserves strategy.

However, the Government recognise that two things have changed since I stood at the Dispatch Box one year ago. First, cost pressures have risen, public sector inflation has increased and the police are facing challenges in meeting new costs such as in forensics and increased employer contributions to safeguard public pensions. More significantly, demand pressures have risen. There has been a major increase in the reporting of high-harm, previously hidden crimes such as child sexual exploitation. The challenge from serious and organised crime networks is growing. Through the serious violence strategy we are bearing down on the worst spike in serious violence and knife crime that we have seen in this country in a decade. Digitally enabled and online crime remains a major challenge for our police, and meanwhile, as we are all aware, the threat from terrorism has escalated and evolved.

The first role of Government is to protect the public, and as crime changes, so must the police. We are determined to ensure that the police have the powers and resources they need to respond to changing demand. Therefore, the Home Secretary and I would like to go further than I indicated last year. As the Home Secretary has signalled over the course of the year, police funding is his No. 1 priority, and he and I have been working closely with our colleagues across Government to agree a comprehensive settlement. Today, we are proposing that the Government will increase grants to police and crime commissioners by £161 million. Every police and crime commissioner will have their Government grant funding protected in real terms, and the package includes £14 million to recognise the specific extra costs and financial challenges of policing London. On top of that, we will allocate additional grant funding of more than £150 million specifically to help the police manage what, since the 2016 Budget, have been unexpected increases in their contribution to public sector pensions.

We have also listened to requests from police and crime commissioners for more flexibility around levels of police precept. This settlement empowers police and crime commissioners to raise council tax contributions for local policing by £2 a month for a typical household, which is £24 a year. If that flexibility is fully utilised, the result will be just over £500 million of additional local investment in local policing. We do not take that decision lightly, because we know money is tight for many people. The decision to raise local tax will be up to locally elected police and crime commissioners, and they will have to make a case to their electorate and be accountable for delivery of a return on that public investment.

On top of the proposed increase in core grant and a doubling of local precept flexibility, we propose investing more in the fight to protect our constituents against terrorism and serious organised crime. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced at the Budget, funding for counter-terrorism policing will increase by £59 million next year to £816 million, which is £160 million more than we planned at the last spending review. We also intend to match the new serious and organised crime strategy with £90 million of much-needed resources to tackle threats including economic crime, child sexual exploitation, fraud and cyber-crime.

This settlement combines increased central funding with increased local contributions to local policing. It enables the biggest investment in frontline policing since 2010, and the start of the journey to get this country back to living within our means. It will allow PCCs to manage their costs while maintaining their plans to recruit and fill capability gaps, not least when it comes to detectives. It will strengthen our capabilities in the fight against serious and organised crime and terrorism.

Alongside that increased investment in the frontline against crime, we will also maintain our existing level of public investment in building national police capabilities and upgrading police technology for the benefit of local forces. We will invest £175 million in the police transformation fund next year. A major priority for us is supporting the police to make the most of the digital opportunity to improve contact with the public and manage police time more effectively. We are also developing the first national programme to support the wellbeing of stretched frontline officers. We support Police Now, which is attracting fresh talent into neighbourhood policing and supporting the role of detectives.

Alongside the police transformation fund we will invest £495 million in technology programmes that will upgrade critical infrastructure such as police databases and the emergency service communications network. Taking everything together, the settlement means that as a country we will be investing up to £14 billion in our police system next year, if all police and crime
commissioners use full precept flexibility. That would represent increased public investment of £2 billion compared with 2015-16.

With increased public investment comes an increased responsibility to improve efficiency and effectiveness, and to show the public what difference their investment is making in terms of greater deterrence for criminals, better outcomes for victims and safer communities. To make the most of the new investment we are announcing today, we will work with the police on ensuring the delivery of the efficiency savings we have identified. We want greater ambition in the use of digital mobile working to improve productivity. We also want to ensure that the major capability gaps that the independent inspectorate identified, on detectives and investigations, are filled, and that there is greater co-ordination of important work to tackle serious and organised crime.

Of course, support for our police is not all about spending taxpayers’ money, and we are also supporting them through new powers. We are working on a cross-party basis to strengthen legislation on offensive weapons, just as we worked on a cross-party basis to strengthen protections for emergency services workers. Let me be clear: our commitment to supporting the police to deliver for the public is for the long term. Come the forthcoming comprehensive spending review, the Government will be prepared to invest appropriately in police capacity, capability and professional confidence, but that must come with greater local accountability of directly elected police and crime commissioners, and a commitment to accelerate the pace of change to ensure that British policing remains the best in the world.

As we have indicated, this settlement is the last before the next spending review, which will set long-term police budgets and address how resources are allocated fairly across police forces—I know that is of great interest to many Members across the House. This Government’s priority is the safety of the public. We understand that our police face increased demands, and we are determined to respond to the threats from terrorism, organised crime and serious violence. We are today announcing a major investment in the capabilities that the police need to respond, and we are rightly challenging them to spend that money well and continue on the path of reform and modernisation. I conclude by expressing my gratitude and that of the Government to police forces around the country for their exceptional attitude, hard work and bravery, and I commend this statement to the House.

1.10 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): I thank the Minister for advance notice of his statement and for his recognition of the demand facing our police forces. Once again, however, we are faced with the Government’s complete refusal to acknowledge their own part in creating that demand.

It is important that we set today’s statement in the context it deserves. The Conservative party has created a crisis in policing. There is no post-war history for a Government to have undermined the police in the way that this Government have. No Government in post-war history have ever slashed the resources available to the police by as much as 30% and cut officers in every year they have been in office. Never, since records began, has violent crime been as high as it is today. Never has knife crime been as high as it is today. Arrests have halved in a decade. Unsolved crimes stand at over 2 million cases, and 93% of domestic violence offences go unprosecuted. Today’s settlement has to stand in that context.

If we are honest—if we are not to mislead the public, as the Office for National Statistics has asked the Government not to do on police funding—today’s settlement represents a ninth consecutive year of real-terms central Government cuts to the police. In September, the Government announced that changes to the police pension valuation would mean an additional £165 million cost to forces in 2019-20, increasing to £417 million in 2021. Why, then, does today’s settlement cover only £150 million of that cost, and why does it provide no certainty for the following year? That cost was dropped on forces at the last minute. Some police and crime commissioners had already started drafting emergency budgets. It was a completely inappropriate way to handle an event that must take place every four years. The Government need to get real. They cannot keep expecting forces to wait until the last minute, with disaster at the door, for the Government to get their act together. Will the Minister commit today to funding the complete pension bill for 2019-20 and 2020-21?

Funding for counter-terrorism and serious organised crime, although welcome, is not seen by local forces, and the funding to tackle fraud and cyber-crime is significantly below the amount requested by police last year.

The Government are once again confirming today their intention to pass the vast majority of the increase in the police funding settlement on to local ratepayers. That is perverse. It will not meet need and is fundamentally unfair. Despite the fact that every band D household or above will be asked to pay the exact same amount in additional tax, different force areas will be able to raise hugely different amounts. The forces that have already been cut the most will be able to raise the least. Can the Minister confirm that today’s settlement will mean that Surrey can raise 44% of the cash it has lost since 2010, whereas the west midlands will be able to raise just 11% of what it has lost; and that Suffolk can raise 30% while Northumbria can raise only 12%? How can the Minister possibly justify a postcode lottery that means the communities that are already seeing higher crime, to which reserves have been allocated, will receive so much less funding?

Can the Minister further confirm that the National Police Chiefs’ Council has calculated the cost of inflation at £435 million this year, wiping out the grant from central Government and almost wiping out the amount the precept will raise, forcing council tax payers to pay the price for their local service to stand still? The simple truth is that because the Home Secretary cannot make the case within the Government for extra resources for the police, he is passing his own political failure on to local ratepayers. He knows that this perverse way of raising income for the police will not and cannot meet the needs of local communities. Instead of a calculation based on demand, rising crime, population and vulnerability, the only determination this is based on is local house prices. Once again, the Minister is at the Dispatch Box
announcing cuts from central Government funding and trying to dress them up as good news. I am afraid no one is falling for it.

Mr Hurd: I have been a shadow Minister and I know that that sometimes requires one to push the boundaries of reasonableness, but I am afraid the hon. Lady has lost all sense of proportion. She talks about the Government creating demand on the police system. I do not know what she means by that. Perhaps she means the pressure we put on the police to improve their recording of crime. Perhaps she means the pressure the current Prime Minister put on the police to improve their support for the most vulnerable people in our communities, which means that more victims of domestic violence and rape are coming forward to the police. If that is what she means, I can see her point.

The hon. Lady tries to claim that the Government are cutting funding to the police in real terms, but I stated very clearly that in this settlement we have moved from flat-cash Home Office grant to police forces to the first real increase in the grant since 2010. That is the reality.

The hon. Lady talks about pension costs, which have been a very real issue. The Treasury has done exactly what it said it would do. I am very clear that through a combination of the special pension grant, the increase in the Home Office grant, the room for efficiencies and the levels of reserves, every single police and crime commissioner should be able to go to their public and talk about local taxes for their local police service.

Finally, for the Labour party to present itself as the champion of the council tax payer, when it doubled council tax when it was in power, is hypocrisy of the worst order. The hon. Lady talks about the council tax being weighed down by this, but in reality the average amount of funding that comes from the precept has moved from 32% to 34% across the police system. The reality is that most of the funding for our police system comes from the taxpayer through central funding.

My challenge to the shadow Minister is this. She and her boss led their colleagues through the No Lobby this time last year, so the Labour party effectively voted against a police settlement that put an additional £460 million into our police. This settlement has the potential to put an additional £70 million into our police system so that we as taxpayers are investing over £2 billion more than we were in 2015-16. This might, therefore, be the moment to put tribal politics and games aside and recognise the fundamental truth that Members on both sides of the House recognise the pressure on the police and want to see increased resources for policing. That is exactly what this settlement delivers.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I very much welcome the Minister’s statement, particularly his recognition of the pressures that the police are under both in demand and in the resources they have to do their job. I pay tribute to the Wandsworth police, who work tirelessly to keep our local community safe.

In my area we have significant extra housing and population arriving, both in the form of the Battersea power station development and because of demand related to the new US and Dutch embassies. Will the Minister set out briefly how we can ensure that additional demands do not squeeze funding for the broader community in Wandsworth?

Mr Hurd: I thank my right hon. Friend and former boss for that question. As a fellow London MP, I am delighted that the Met could receive an additional £172 million next year if the Mayor raises precept flexibility by the full £24. He has indicated that he will. That comes on to top of an additional £100 million of public investment in the Met this year. The challenge for the commissioner and the Mayor, who is accountable to the people of Wandsworth for how resources are allocated, is to make sure that police resources are not just allocated to existing demand but used to better anticipate future demand, reflecting factors such as those she talks about. It is a challenge, but it is one that police leadership should be up to. We are determined to make sure they have the resources they need to do their job. I am sure she would agree that this settlement enables just that.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Minister has rightly talked about the increasing pressures on policing, as the Home Affairs Committee set out in our report, and we look forward to scrutinising the detail of the figures that he set out. Will he confirm what I think he just said—that once we take account of inflation, the increased pension costs and funding, there is not a real increase in Government funding for police forces? Will he also say what he thinks the impact of the funding will be, given that arrests have halved in the last 10 years, and even in the last three years we have seen an increase of about one third in the level of recorded crime, but a drop of one quarter in the number of charges and summons? Does he think that arrests, charges and summons will go up as a result of these figures?

Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Lady for that question and for her challenging, but extremely good, report on future policing. This settlement enables additional investment of up to £970 million in our police system, of which £509 million could come from PCCs, if all of them use their flexibility. Within that, as I said in my statement, we have moved from a situation where the Home Office grant is flat cash to one in which every single PCC will see flat real in relation to the first increase in the grant from the Home Office since 2010. She is right to point to a worrying trend in some of the outcomes of policing. The right hon. Lady and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), identified that and were right to do so. For me, the critical thing now is to increase the capacity of the police and to fill some key capability gaps. She knows that one of the most important of those is the lack of detectives. Therefore, one thing that I and the Home Secretary will be following very closely next year, as I am sure her Committee will, is an improvement in exactly the outcomes that she identified.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): I very much welcome the additional resources for policing—something that I and Government Members have raised with the Prime Minister, as the Minister will be aware. Does he agree, though, that we need to urge the Mayor of London to start using some of his £500 million of reserves to strengthen policing and to keep Barnet police station open?

Mr Hurd: I speak not just as the Minister for Policing, but as the Minister for London and a London MP. Certainly, a large part of my ongoing conversations
with the Mayor will be on the question, “What are you doing with the money?” The taxpayer has put in an additional £100 million this year. As I have said, there is the potential from this settlement for an additional £172 million of public investment in the Met. It is already a force that has over one and a half times the national average in terms of police officers per head, so the voice from Londoners will get increasingly loud in asking, “What are we getting for the money?”

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): Yet another tragic case of knife crime in my constituency led to a death within the last 48 hours. Ten years ago, there were 31,000 police officers in London, and the Mayor of London is now warning that that is going to drop to below 27,000. Back then, I had six police officers per ward in my constituency, and I am now struggling to get two. The Government were warned about the dangers of cutting the police so severely and now we are suffering the consequences. What will this announcement do to address the severe cuts that we have seen over the last eight years?

Mr Hurd: As a fellow Londoner, I say to the hon. Gentleman that there is absolutely cross-party consensus on the absolute determination that we need to bear down on this horrific spike in serious violence and knife crime. I am sure that the whole House will want to pass on through him their condolences to the family and friends of the victim of that tragedy. Through the serious violence strategy and the serious violence taskforce, on which the Mayor sits, as do other London Labour MPs, there is an absolute determination to combine robust policing with a big investment in prevention and early intervention to do just that. The Met needs more resources, as I said. An additional £100 million of taxpayers’ money is going into that system this year. This settlement enables additional investment of £172 million, if Sadiq Khan increases precept flexibility. The hon. Gentleman talks about police officer numbers. I am sure that he is aware—and will welcome the fact—that the commissioner is actively recruiting an additional 1,000 officers. We all wait to see what the result of this settlement will be in terms of updating those plans.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much welcome the statement, and I thank the Minister for providing extra resources to deal with the Salisbury and Amesbury incidents. The fact remains, however, that Wiltshire gets £151 per person from the Government to deal with policing. Nationally, the figure is £171 per person. I am sure that he wants to close that gap. Does he propose that that is done through the £161 million that he has announced today, or does he think that Angus Macpherson, our police and crime commissioner, should be raising money locally through the precept using the powers announced today?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Through him, again, I congratulate and place on record our appreciation of the work of Wiltshire police in response to the Salisbury incident. I hope he will welcome the fact that this year, public funding in Wiltshire policing increased by £4 million and that this settlement enables further investment of up to £9 million, of which £2 million will come from additional grant funding. It is for the local police and crime commissioner to consult colleagues and weigh up his options on using the full precept flexibly. I cannot take that decision for him—he must consult local MPs and people who understand the public pulse in Wiltshire—but if he does so, he has the ability to raise an additional £7 million for local policing in Wiltshire.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Last year, West Midlands police took 40,000 extra 999 calls and recorded 27,000 more crimes and 3,000 more violent crimes, yet it has 2,000 fewer officers. Law and order in our city is now resting on the heroism of officers such as Matt Crowley, who led a major operation against the dealers of violence this week. The Minister knows that we needed £25.5 million extra for 500 extra officers to keep our city safe. At best, can he confirm that we have only half that money and that once more, West Midlands police will be sent forward with one arm tied behind its back?

Mr Hurd: I do not accept that last statement, because that is a grotesque exaggeration of the situation. The West Midlands police force is an extremely important police force in the system, with a proud history of innovation. Funding—public investment—in that system increased by £10 million this year. This settlement enables the police and crime commissioner to increase public investment by up to £34 million, of which £16 million will come from central Government grants. The west midlands has, I think, an above average number of police officers per head of population, compared with the national average, and broadly the national average in terms of crime recorded by police officers, but it is a stretched police force. I absolutely understand that and I see this settlement as another important milestone on the journey towards the next comprehensive spending review, which is the most important event in shaping police funding for the next few years.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): As someone who has campaigned vociferously on behalf of Bedfordshire police, I say thank you for enabling Bedfordshire to raise an extra £8 million next year, which is very welcome indeed. Does the Policing Minister share my outrage at the escalation in the theft of tools from vans? We have just had Small Business Saturday. Someone who steals tools from a work person’s van takes their livelihood. I am concerned that the police might not take that crime as seriously as I think they should. Does he share my concern about that particular issue?

Mr Hurd: I do share that concern, because I absolutely understand the economic impact on that small business trade, and I would expect the police to take that crime seriously. This is an opportunity for me to place on record again my admiration for and thanks to my hon. Friend for his tenacity in advocating for increased funding for Bedfordshire police. I hope that he is pleased about the exceptional grant that I announced a few months ago and that he will welcome a settlement that has the potential to increase funding into Bedfordshire police by up to £8 million next year.
Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): On Merseyside, we have seen a cut of more than 1,000 police officers since 2010, which is a 24% decrease. Despite the very best efforts of our police, they simply cannot provide the same level of service. Levels of certain crimes are going up and our police are under incredible pressure, as we have seen in the increase in the number of 999 calls.

I listened closely to the Minister. Will he categorically confirm that, of the £161 million increase in grants to the police, almost all—£152 million—will be eaten up by higher pensions? That will mean that inflation and pay increase costs will have to be met by council tax payers—it is about £24 a year, which we are not guaranteed to raise. That means that Merseyside police will just stand still. How on earth is that an acceptable state of affairs?

Mr Hurd: The settlement allows police and crime commissioners to absorb the increase in costs that they face while hopefully enabling them to continue their plans for recruitment and for filling in capability gaps. Like many other police forces, Merseyside police is stretched and does incredibly important and difficult work. Although the hon. Lady voted against it, I hope she welcomes the additional public investment of £5 million in Merseyside police, and that she will support a funding settlement that could increase funding into Merseyside police by up to £18 million this year, of which £8.6 million will come from central Government grant.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Policemen and women in Northamptonshire do a wonderful job in very challenging circumstances and deserve the thanks of hon. Members and of the public. Will the Policing Minister confirm that the funding settlement could mean up to an extra £9 million into Northamptonshire police, and does he share my hope that the police and crime commissioner will use the money to continue to increase police numbers?

Mr Hurd: I place on record my admiration for the work of Northamptonshire police and the police and crime commissioner. They are a good force in relation to efficiency, and benefited from increased funding of £4 million this year, which my hon. Friend voted for. I hope he will support this settlement, which I can confirm of hon. Members and of the public. Will the Policing Minister confirm that the funding settlement could encourage people to remain in the police force and encourage new recruits?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour. He is entirely right, and I will be sitting down with Pinner residents tomorrow to discuss exactly their concerns about the spike in aggravated burglary. The police response, to their credit, has been good, including enhanced neighbourhood team working and enhanced advice on crime prevention. One of the gangs in the case has been disrupted. There has been a good policing response, but the situation requires additional resources going into the Metropolitan police, in part to support increased investment in frontline officers but, critically, to support increased investment in detectives, who follow up crime and give a better service to victims. I hope he supports the settlement for that reason.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that the proposed increase in the precept in the Merseyside police force area will mean that people in all council tax bands will experience a 13% increase? Jane Kennedy, the police and crime commissioner, says that that will allow only for a stand-still budget on Merseyside. At the same time, we have seen a worrying increase in knife and gun crime, and the needless and tragic loss of so many young lives, yet the Minister has been unprepared to meet the police and crime commissioner and local MPs to discuss it. Will he undertake to meet the commissioner, the chief constable and local MPs to discuss how we can tackle that appalling problem?

Mr Hurd: With genuine respect to the right hon. Gentleman, I have met Jane on a number of occasions, and once specifically with the Under-Secretary of State together all the agencies, including health and education, to discuss what needs to be done to combine robust policing with effective prevention and intervention work, and support for young people. That strategy is properly funded, not least through the £200 million youth endowment fund. That is long-term money to support that work and to support young people up and down the country.

The right hon. Gentleman’s second point on the demands placed on the police system by the need to support people in crisis or who are suffering from mental health issues is an extremely important one. The recommendations of the review of the Mental Health Act 1983 were extremely valuable not only on what needs to change to reduce the demand on the police system, but on ensuring that people in crisis who are suffering from mental health issues are supported by the right people—the people qualified to help them, which in many cases is not the police. One dividend I want from the additional investment in local mental health services announced in the Budget is a reduction in the demand on policing. I hope he will support me in that.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The murder rate in London is at its highest since 2008. My right hon. Friend the Minister will know that, in Harrow, we face a spike in aggravated burglaries—burglars burst into people’s homes knowing that they are there to intimidate them and beat them up. That clearly needs extra policing resources, but not ordinary policing resources—it needs detectives with experience and capability. What in the settlement will encourage people to remain in the police force and encourage new recruits?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend and parliamentary neighbour. He is entirely right, and I will be sitting down with Pinner residents tomorrow to discuss exactly their concerns about the spike in aggravated burglary. The police response, to their credit, has been good, including enhanced neighbourhood team working and enhanced advice on crime prevention. One of the gangs in the case has been disrupted. There has been a good policing response, but the situation requires additional resources going into the Metropolitan police, in part to support increased investment in frontline officers but, critically, to support increased investment in detectives, who follow up crime and give a better service to victims. I hope he supports the settlement for that reason.
for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who has responsibility for crime and safeguarding, to discuss serious violence.

Mr Howarth: We have asked four times and had no answer.

Mr Hurd: I am not aware of that. I see Jane quite regularly, as I do the chief. Given the seriousness of the matter, I am more than happy to sit down with Merseyside MPs—I give that undertaking, and was unaware of those unanswered requests. We have an open and regular dialogue with the police leadership.

The settlement helps police and crime commissioners to manage cost pressures—the pension issue was a serious concern—in a way that will allow Jane to go to the people of Merseyside and say clearly that any increase in the local precept will go into local policing. That is one objective of the settlement.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Despite the exceptional efforts of the Humberside force, there is growing concern among my constituents that too many serious crimes such as burglary and attacks on retail staff go without investigation. Will the Minister assure my constituents that the additional resources going to the force will allow for more investigations into those crimes?

Mr Hurd: Through my hon. Friend, I pass on my congratulations to the Humberside force for some very impressive performance improvements within existing resources, which has been noticed by the independent inspectorate.

I hope my hon. Friend welcomes the settlement, which builds on last year’s, which resulted in an additional £4 million-worth of investment in Humberside policing this year. This year’s settlement enables an increase of up to £11 million of further investment. It is obviously up to the local police and crime commissioner, operating and working with local MPs and colleagues, to decide how those resources are allocated, but I am sure my hon. Friend will be a powerful advocate for exactly what he describes.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Under this Government, since 2010, we have seen the lowest number of police officers in Humberside since the 1970s. It is welcome that under the current chief constable and the police and crime commissioner, Keith Hunter, recruitment is starting to take off again, but what I think worries all Humberside Members is what we were told by the chief constable. He said that if the funds were not found for the additional payments into the police pension scheme, up to 120 officers could lose their jobs and all police community support officers could go. I know that the Minister has just talked about the money that is available for this financial year, but—my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) made this point—what about 2019-20 and 2020-21?

Mr Hurd: I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming the increased recruitment of police officers in Humberside, which, I should add, was made possible by a police settlement that she voted against. This settlement enables the police and crime commissioner and the new chief constable to continue that process, not least as the increased costs and the pension costs are absorbed.

The hon. Lady made an important point about what will happen beyond 2019-20. We have made it very clear that the conversation about how those resources are allocated is between the police and crime commissioner, operating up to £11 million of further investment. It is obviously up to the local police and crime commissioner, Keith Passmore, and the chief constable, to attend by about 100 farmers, and will deal specifically with the issue of rural crime following a wave of significant incidents on the Suffolk-Essex borders in recent months. While I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, what message will he give me to take to that meeting about the resources to which we may look forward in Suffolk as a result of his statement?

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Tomorrow afternoon I will host a meeting in the village of Lavenham, together with the police and crime commissioner, Tim Passmore, and the chief constable. It is likely to be attended by about 100 farmers, and will deal specifically with the issue of rural crime following a wave of significant incidents on the Suffolk-Essex borders in recent months. While I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, what message will he give me to take to that meeting about the resources to which we may look forward in Suffolk as a result of his statement?

Mr Hurd: Like many colleagues, my hon. Friend has been a tireless advocate of increased resources for policing, and specifically for Suffolk policing. This settlement builds on the settlement for 2018-19, which provided an additional £3 million for Suffolk: it will allow a further investment of up to £9 million. What my hon. Friend can communicate to that meeting is the Government’s determination to ensure that Suffolk and other police forces have the resources that they need to meet the increasing demands caused by the change in and variety of crime in his area. I do, of course, understand the significance of rural crime, and the determination of farmers to ensure that the police and crime commissioner is attributing the right level of importance to it.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Over the last few years, the West Midlands police force has lost £175 million and 2,000 officers as a result of Government cuts. Violent crime and murders are up, and in the past 10 years the number of arrests has fallen by 50%. I am being lobbied by the public because of their frustration about the lack of action when they report crimes, and I am being lobbied by the police because, as good public servants, they are deeply demoralised by their inability to meet the legitimate demands placed on them by the public.

The Minister said that Opposition Members who raised this issue were doing so for tribal reasons. Will he withdraw that comment, and recognise that Opposition Members are exercising their democratic duty in reporting the legitimate fears of the people whom they represent? Will he also tell me whether, in one year’s time, any of the negative statistics that we have seen in the West Midlands will be reversed as a result of this settlement?

Mr Hurd: I fully recognise the pressures on West Midlands police. Both the hon. Gentleman’s concern and the concern expressed to him by his constituents are clearly genuine. My straight answer to him, however, is that, given that concern, he should support a police funding settlement that has the capacity to increase funding for West Midlands police by up to £34 million. In doing so, he also might correct a wrong, namely, his action in voting against a settlement that increased funding for that force by £10 million in the current year.
Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I do not think that members of the public would appreciate any reduction in resources for the police force because of an actuarial calculation. I thank my right hon. Friend, and the Prime Minister, for responding so well to representations from me, from London Tory MPs, and from Shaun Bailey. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is now important for the Mayor of London to put the whole £172 million of extra funding into the hands of the Metropolitan Police Commissioner as soon as possible, so that she can plan effectively for recruitment, tackling knife crime, and delivering to keep Londoners safe?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend, and other London colleagues, for their persistence in lobbying to ensure that the Metropolitan police have the resources that they need, and that the additional cost pressures, which have been a genuine problem, are cushioned by this settlement. I thank him for his support for it.

If the Mayor uses his maximum flexibility, which he has indicated that he will, there will be an additional £172 million of public investment in the Met, on top of the extra £100 million this year. That is a serious amount of money. My hon. Friend and I, together with other colleagues, will be holding the Mayor and the Commissioner to account for the way in which that money is spent, and, in particular, for ensuring that we see continued progress in driving down the serious violence that is so deeply unsettling for Londoners.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Last week I saw at first hand just how stretched our local police are when I joined officers patrolling Bradford. Areas such as mine, which have seen a surge in violent and sexual crimes, have also seen some of the biggest cuts. When will central Government stop passing the buck to local ratepayers, and take responsibility for funding our police properly?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her support for her local police force in West Yorkshire. I am sure that, given her desire to see them supported properly, she will welcome a settlement that has the capacity to increase their funding by £28.5 million this year. I look forward to her support in the Lobby.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): The Minister knows from our meetings that I wanted to see a strong settlement for the police. I am delighted that there will be an extra £13 million for Leicestershire police, and I am very pleased about the money to protect police pensions.

Does the Minister agree with me on two points? First, does he agree that this must be a first step towards a strong settlement in next year’s spending review, with a fair funding formula attached to it? Secondly, will he confirm that the new programme to look after officers’ welfare will especially help officers who have been victims of violence in the course of their duty? All of us in the House want to see stiffer sentences for those who attack police officers, and we are all very proud of the Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) to do just that, but must we not also look after the welfare of those poor officers who have been attacked while protecting all the rest of us?

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr Hurd: I could not agree more, and I think my hon. Friend senses the House’s full approval of what he has said. I congratulate him personally on his tenacity in advocating more resources and support for Leicestershire police.

My hon. Friend has also raised a very important point. One of the unacceptable features of the modern landscape and the circumstances that the police have to manage is the increased number of assaults and abuse of members of the police and emergency services. It was entirely right that, on a cross-party basis, led by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the House came together to take that Bill through Parliament to send the strongest possible signal that we find such actions absolutely unacceptable.

Yes, I can confirm that as part of the settlement and part of the investment through the police transformation fund, we are working with the police to build the first national welfare programme to support the wellbeing of officers who are having to work in very challenging circumstances, often feeling very stretched. Their welfare and wellbeing is of huge importance to us, and we are investing public money to support it.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The West Midlands police service has suffered a £175 million cut and the loss of 2,000 police officers. With violent crime up, gun crime up, knife crime up and burglaries up, fear stalks the streets in too many communities in the west midlands. Today’s settlement is a cut in real terms. It passes the buck to hard-pressed council tax payers, and it simply does not go far enough to put back on the beat the 500 officers whom we badly need in Birmingham and the west midlands. I pay tribute to the members of our police service, who have been nothing short of heroic, but as the thin blue line is drawn ever thinner, is it not the case that the Government are failing in the first duty of any Government, which is to ensure the safety and security of their citizens?

Mr Hurd: No, I deny that completely. Like last year’s settlement, this settlement is entirely designed to make sure we increase the resources available to policing. The hon. Gentleman is tenacious in this regard, but he and other Labour Members consistently fail to make any connection between the need to reduce police budgets and the imperative to get serious about reducing the largest peacetime budget deficit in this country’s history. The cuts were the consequence of Labour action, which he supported, and it was our job to try to clear up that mess. As we make progress on that journey, we are now able as a country to do more in terms of public investment in our public services. The police are a priority for the Home Secretary, as we have made clear, and this settlement could not be clearer about the ambition we have, within the resources we have got, to prioritise public safety and make sure that the police have the support they need—for West Midlands police the potential for an increase of up to £34 million of additional investment, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will support that.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): This is a positive announcement for Greater Manchester police, who serve my constituency so well. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that it will allow them to increase frontline officer numbers and that more can be done in the forthcoming spending review so that they can properly respond to the victims of crime?
Mr Hurd: Yes, I can certainly confirm that this settlement has the potential to increase funding to GMP by up to £35 million, of which almost £15 million comes from central Government grants. Again that is an enormously important police force that is stretched and is facing challenging circumstances, which is why we are determined to come to this House with an ambitious settlement to increase resources for policing and capacity for policing, and I look forward to my hon. Friend’s support.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): My constituents in Battersea are seeing an alarming rise in crime, with violent crime having increased by more than 15% in just six months this year. Following over £2 billion of cuts by this Tory Government to our local forces, can the Minister now confirm that the funding settlement today is only a tiny fraction of what has already been cut from our forces since 2010, and this will leave our police forces unable to meet the surge in violent crime?

Mr Hurd: I do not think my constituents would consider £172 million of increased investment in London policing, if that is what the Mayor enables, to be a small, tiny step; I think most people would recognise that to be a large amount of money. They want the police to have more support and welcome the fact that the Met are recruiting additional officers, yet the hon. Lady joins other Labour MPs in slamming the tune on the jukebox, which completely ignores the economic reality that the last Labour Government ran out of money and ran up the biggest budget deficit in the history of this country, and it was our responsibility to sort that out.

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I thank the Minister and the Home Secretary for listening to the points raised on the Conservative Benches about the need to increase funding for our police and help to tackle crime. I also hope he agrees with me about supporting forces like Staffordshire police. We are led by a fantastic Conservative PCC, who is doing fantastic work to lead that police force. Will my right hon. Friend also confirm that Staffordshire police will receive an additional £13 million due to this funding settlement to help tackle crime in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire?

Mr Hurd: I thank my hon. Friend for his representations on behalf of Staffordshire police. He knows how important it is for his constituents that the police are well supported. This is indeed a settlement that has the capacity to increase investment into Staffordshire policing by up to £13 million. The excellent PCC Matthew Ellis has got some choices to make, but he will be supported by an increased grant from central Government. I thank my hon. Friend for his support for this settlement.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The police Minister knows that I have seen for myself the pressures facing South Wales police, particularly in Cardiff, not just from the increasing demand from everything from county lines to spice to missing persons, but from the specific demands on it as a capital city hosting major events and as a seat of Government. The Minister met me, the chief constable and the PCC, and we made a very reasonable request to him; I wonder if he has had a chance to consider it further and has anything hopeful to say to us. On the police pensions gap, I appreciate what he said about next year, but beyond that the gap is projected to be £417 million a year, £10 million of which would fall as a burden on South Wales police. Where is that money going to come from in the future?

Mr Hurd: The hon. Gentleman made a powerful representation on behalf of Cardiff, which I am genuinely and seriously looking at. The more specific answer to that and his broader question around pension costs is rooted in the strategy for the CSR, which is active work under way in anticipation of a spending review next year. He talks about a pensions gap; there is not a pensions gap in 2019-20 as a result of this settlement, and I am determined that through the CSR, with the full support of the Home Secretary, we will get a robust settlement for the police that allows them to increase their capacity and improve their response to changing demand.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): During the last hour or so Members have quite rightly been standing up for their own areas, but nobody can say what I am going to say. As the Minister knows from his frequent meetings with Lincolnshire MPs, Lincolnshire is the lowest funded police authority per head in the country—just £88 compared with £99 for Norfolk, a comparable authority. The Minister knows that from our meetings, and he knows that Marc Jones, our excellent commissioner, is now warning that we might lose all our PCSOs and see the complete end of community policing in Lincolnshire. He knows that Bill Skelly, our excellent chief constable, has warned that he might lose up to 60 police officers. He knows, too, that after years of belt-tightening going back over the 35 years that I have been in this House we cannot save £16 million over the next three years. So I beg the police Minister to raise his eyes from his excellent brief and convince us in Lincolnshire that we are going to get a fair funding formula. This is about justice. This is a county that has loyally supported the Conservatives in all my lifetime; where is the justice?

Mr Hurd: My hon. Friend is, along with other Lincolnshire MPs—I am sitting on the Front Bench next to one now, my ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins)—assiduous, as are Marc and Bill, in making this point on behalf of Lincolnshire. I hope that my hon. Friend will welcome and support a funding settlement that has the potential to see an additional £9 million of funding going into Lincolnshire Police in 2019-20 on top of the £3 million that the settlement for 2018-19 enabled, and on top of consideration of exceptional grant funding as well. But I absolutely accept my hon. Friend’s main point that there is a serious set of decisions to be taken about how funding is allocated across police forces; there is a very serious issue around the fairness of that allocation, and I have indicated very clearly that this settlement is the final stepping stone on the journey towards that work in the CSR, which is the appropriate strategic framework in which to settle police funding for the next five years. He and others have a powerful case to make on behalf of Lincolnshire, a force that does excellent work under extremely difficult circumstances and is extremely well led, not least by Marc Jones.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): The Minister and his London cronies really have got some brass neck, in one breath asking what the Mayor of London has done...
to tackle crime, and in the next breath trying to take credit for the 1,000 police officers being put on London’s streets thanks to action by London’s Mayor. Is it not the case that, even after this funding settlement announced today and the huge increases in charges for council tax payers that will follow, the funding announcement made by the Minister will barely dent the loss of 3,000 police officers, more than 3,000 PCSOs and 5,000 police staff across London, and that is the tragedy that is fuelling rising crime on the streets of my constituency?

**Mr Hurd:** Well, to be accused by the hon. Gentleman of brass neck is something. I hope that he welcomes the fact that the commissioner is now in a position to recruit an additional 1,000 officers as a result of the actions taken in the police settlement last year—

**Wes Streeting:** And by the Mayor.

**Mr Hurd:** And the actions by the Mayor of London. We now have an opportunity to increase funding to the Metropolitan police by up to £172 million, which will seem—and is—a large amount of money to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, as it does to mine. I sincerely hope that, rather than grandstanding, he will support the Government on this.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): The Minister repeatedly claims to recognise that the first duty of his Government is to protect UK citizens, including my constituents, but he is moving funding for the police on to town council tax payers when wages are still flatlining and in-work poverty is at an all-time high. Northumbria has lost a third of its officers while demand is rising as a result of crimes ranging from burglary to historical sexual abuse to terrorism, as we have seen this week. Will he tell me whether this settlement will get us back our lost bobbies and give Northumbria police the funding they need so that hard-pressed police officers can do the jobs they love to do?

**Mr Hurd:** The hon. Lady tries to make a point about loading police funding on to council tax payers, when precept funding for Northumbria police represents 19% of total funding. The issue for Northumbria police is a low tax base and an historical decision not to raise council tax. This means that the precept level is low. Vera Baird now has an option to increase council tax by up to £2 a month, and the hon. Lady will have her own view on whether that is acceptable to her constituents. To her point, this is a settlement that builds on a settlement that put £5 million more into Northumbria policing this year, and has the potential to put in a further £18 million next year, to deliver exactly the things she is talking about, so I would be very surprised if she did not support the Government in the voting Lobby.

**Ellie Reeves** (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): I have heard what the Minister has had to say about London, but the reality is that since 2010 the Met has faced cuts of £1 billion from central Government. The Government are to blame for the funding crisis in policing. Raising the council tax precept will mean that hard-working families will have to foot the bill and that police budgets will still be significantly underfunded compared with 2010. When will the Government stop abdicating responsibility and undo the damage caused by years of austerity?

**Mr Hurd:** My question is: when will Labour MPs grasp economic reality and understand the reason why budgets had to be cut in the first place? It is also recognised by almost everyone that there was enormous scope to improve the efficiency of the Metropolitan police, and I congratulate the police leadership on the work they have done to do exactly that. The reality is that this settlement has the ability to put another £172 million into Metropolitan police funding, on top of £100 million in 2018-19. For all those reasons, I would expect the hon. Lady to support this.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): The Minister has repeatedly referred to a “spike” in serious violence. May I urge him to stop using that word? It is not a spike unless and until we actually get these numbers down. The truth is that it is a rising surge. In particular, the horrific assaults on emergency workers that are preventing them from saving people’s lives really have to be tackled. If the police on my patch in South Wales are to be able to do that, they will need additional resources. We need to see the law implemented fully. My biggest fear is that, if South Wales police has a £10 million shortfall in its pension fund, it will be areas such as the Rhondda and the small towns and villages on my patch that will lose out on any kind of policing whatsoever. We really need additional resources in South Wales police.

**Mr Hurd:** I actually understand the hon. Gentleman’s point. I use the word “spike” because I am determined, as are my colleagues, that it is a spike and not a shift. We have been here before, in London 10 years ago, when there was a spike and we succeeded in bearing down on it—

**Louise Haigh:** We did that.

**Mr Hurd:** The Labour party is claiming some credit for that, but I do not think that the Mayor at the time was Labour. I seem to remember that he was called Boris. Leaving that aside, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) makes a serious point about the need for additional resourcing for policing. We on the Government Benches absolutely accept that argument, because we absolutely accept the pressures on the police. I happen to think that we are as one with Labour Front Benchers on this, because we all recognise the pressure on the police. We all recognise that the police need additional resources. We are pragmatic, and we know that the public finances remain constrained, but this is an ambitious settlement that—if the police and crime commissioner uses the full power—will see up to £19 million more going into South Wales police on top of the £8 million increase that went in this year. I sincerely hope that I can count on the hon. Gentleman’s support when this measure comes to a vote.

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): The Minister repeatedly mentioned the need to tackle debt. He will know that the debt-to-GDP ratio, which is the only measure that counts, remains stagnant under this Government and that the cuts to public services simply funded cuts to things like corporation tax, which made little or no difference to a slow-growing economy that has been hampered by this Government’s failed Brexit agenda. Can the Minister look me in the eye and tell me that the massive increase in knife crime and the 130 murders
in London this year have nothing to do with the £850 million cuts that the Met police has already had to implement since 2010? Can he also explain how the £33 million of Government core funding that he has announced today for the Met will in any way fill that gap?

**Mr Hurd:** The hon. Lady and I share an absolute determination to bear down on this terrible violence in London, and I salute the work that she has been doing for some time on that issue. Where she is wrong is on the economics. She talks about tax cuts, but she is talking to a party that has cut income tax for 32 million people and that has reduced the amount of tax paid by a basic-rate payer by £1,205 since it has been in power. She is talking to a party that, despite what it had to do to get public finances under control, has managed to keep council tax as low as possible. That is in stark contrast to her party, which doubled council tax when it was in power.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Minister’s commitment to the extra moneys to address terrorism and organised crime. Hailing from Northern Ireland, and from my constituency, I believe that security measures are as essential as the NHS. Funding has to be set aside for policing and communities, but funding for additional staffing must also be met. Will the Minister meet the cost of those duties and demands, and not rely on further tax hikes at council level, which would fall on the shoulders and the backs of the middle class, who are already squeezed?

**Mr Hurd:** The hon. Gentleman will know that this is a settlement for England and Wales. To his point, it is designed to help police and crime commissioners to manage the very real cost pressures that they face while giving them the space to continue their plans to recruit additional officers and fill key capability gaps. Our priority is to help the police to increase their capacity and to do an even better job in responding to increases in demand. That is the full intention of this settlement.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** And the prize for patience and perseverance goes to Kerry McCarthy.

**Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. There is one advantage to being called last, in that I have now heard the Minister respond over and over again to my many colleagues who have raised the increase in violent crime, the impact of the cuts and the loss of frontline police officers in their constituencies. He has not answered anyone who has questioned him on whether the extra money he has announced today will do any more than just fill the pensions funding gap. We have lost 700 frontline police officers in the Avon and Somerset force. Will today’s announcement mean that we can replace them?

**Mr Hurd:** I am sorry that the hon. Lady felt that she did not hear an answer to that question. The reality is that the additional pension costs for 2019-20 are £330 million, and this settlement is designed so that, if all police and crime commissioners use their precept flexibility, there will be an additional investment of £970 million in our police system. Within that, there is plenty of scope to go beyond standing still. Our intention is to support excellent forces such as Avon and Somerset to increase their capacity to deliver a better service to the hon. Lady’s constituents. This year, she voted against a settlement that put an additional £8 million into Avon and Somerset police, but I hope she will not vote against a settlement that has the potential to increase funding by up to £21 million for that police force in 2019-20.
Points of Order

2.9 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I apologise for not being able to raise this matter with you in advance—the Policing Minister may be interested to hear this—but I am aware of concerns about harassment targeted at some of the peaceful demonstrators who have been outside Parliament for many weeks, months or years protesting about issues around Brexit. I am always unclear about the boundaries of the parliamentary estate, but I am sure that you would agree, along with many Members, that people should be able to express themselves and protest freely and peacefully outside Parliament’s buildings.

I am told that some of those protestors, particularly those from SODEM—the Stand of Defiance European Movement—including Steven Bray, are being harassed by people holding potentially defamatory placards targeting individuals and by the activities of the far right. This is a relatively recent development and, as I think you will be aware, these good-natured protests have been going on quite peacefully for a long time. Could you use your offices to speak to the parliamentary security authorities to ensure that protestors are kept safe, that their right to protest is respected and that contact is made with the Metropolitan Police to ensure that those protests are able to continue in a safe and secure way?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point of order. It is matter of concern for Parliament and for Members that peaceful protests should be allowed in the vicinity of Parliament. Exactly what constitutes peaceful protest and what crosses the line into a breach of the peace is another matter, and one on which I obviously cannot comment without knowing further details. The hon. Gentleman has targeted his point of order well in raising it while the Policing Minister is still in the Chamber.

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Hurd): indicated assent.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 6 November, I tabled a written parliamentary question to the Ministry of Justice regarding the number of appeals involving special educational needs cases and tribunals, asking for that material to be provided on a local authority basis. On 12 November, I received a response from the Department saying that such information would be placed in the Library. It is now 13 December and that information has not been provided despite regular calls from my office to the Library and the Ministry of Justice to try to secure it. Given that so few sitting days remain, I wonder whether you can advise me on how best to secure that information so that I may update my constituents, who are worried about special educational needs tribunals.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order. As she will know, the Chair has no power whatsoever over the way in which Ministers operate their Departments, but I will echo what Mr Speaker has said many times. There is a duty upon Ministers and their Departments to answer hon. Members’ questions in a timely fashion, and it would appear that the hon. Lady has waited quite some time for her answer. By raising the matter right now, she has brought it to the attention of those on the Treasury Bench, and I am sure that her points will have been noted. If she still does not receive an answer, I am sure that she will come back to Mr Speaker for further advice and that he would be happy to help.
Public Health Model to Reduce Youth Violence

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move, unfortunately unable to attend because I was required to meet meetings. There was a meeting only last week that I was unable to attend. There has been a period of five weeks between one or two meetings pretty much every month, although there may be more work going on outside this Chamber.

Although the Benches may not be as full today as they were last week, there will be more people in the Chamber for future debates with me and other Ministers. I hope that colleagues will pay attention to this issue in their constituencies and in conversations with me and other Ministers. I hope that they will help the House to understand them.

I also hope that at the conclusion of the debate we will have discovered not just the Government’s approach to tackling serious violence, but the will of the House to work together to stop these terrible crimes. We are all committed to breaking the deadly cycle of violence, and the Government published our serious violence strategy earlier this year, which outlines an ambitious programme of work to tackle the issue.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): It is important to state for the people watching this debate just how worried this House is. Over 40 young people between the ages of 13 and 24 have died from violence this year in London alone—over 40—but there are fewer than 30 Members in the Chamber debating this important issue right now. What does she say to people watching these proceedings who think, “Do you know what? That lot just don’t care”? Look at these empty green Benches. How will the Minister explain them to people watching right now?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who contributes a great deal through the serious violence taskforce, which is chaired by the Home Secretary and brings together colleagues from across the House and people from local government, Whitehall Departments, the police, health and so on to try to tease out ways of tackling serious violence. I understand his point. It is of course for each Member of Parliament to decide which debates to attend. However, looking at the colleagues who are here, I know that they have all paid particular attention to this issue in their constituencies and in conversations with me and other Ministers. I hope that there will be more people in the Chamber for future such debates, but anyone watching should rest assured that, although the Benches may not be as full today as they were on 9 January, we do not publish the minutes of the meeting because we want people to be able to exchange full and frank views. I am grateful to hon. Members throughout the House who take part in the taskforce, which has pushed on a programme of work across Government, including on exclusions and social media activity. I plan to move on to that later in my speech.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): The Minister acknowledges that this is a huge problem and that the murder rate is at its highest since 2008, with the 130th homicide of the year in London happening earlier this week. Will she therefore explain why we are taking so long to get on to the public health model? It was deployed in Glasgow in 2005 and efforts and initiatives by groups such as Redthread have been going since 2005, so why is it taking so long to get this model going?

Victoria Atkins: The right hon. Gentleman will know that the serious violence strategy, which I am about to come on to, sets out the cross-governmental, multi-agency approach to the public health model. He mentions Redthread, so I hope he knows that the Home Office has been funding charities such as Redthread, St Giles Trust and other important and valuable contributors from the charitable sphere for some time now, because we recognise that law enforcement and policing is not the only answer. Of course it is important, but we want to get to the early causes of crime to prevent young people in particular from being dragged into criminality and snared by gangs, particularly in the case of county lines.

Norman Lamb: (North Norfolk) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will give way, after which I will make some progress.

Norman Lamb: I share the concern of others about the horrifying death toll. I pay tribute to the work of the Youth Violence Commission in highlighting these issues. Given that we are considering a public health approach in this debate, is the Minister conscious of the clear correlation between people experiencing adversity, trauma, abuse and neglect in their early years and the emergence of mental ill health, exclusion from school, violence and so on? Does she agree that it is vital that we apply the evidence of what works in those early years to prevent such trauma from becoming entrenched and, potentially, to prevent violence?

Victoria Atkins: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his work on this subject over the years, and I join him in paying tribute to the work of the Youth Violence Commission. I absolutely agree about adverse childhood experiences. He will know there is a new inter-ministerial group, chaired by the Leader of the House, focusing on the first two years of life. I invited myself on to that group because it is of such interest to my portfolio.

When I speak to young people who are involved in gangs, and to their youth workers, the prevalence of domestic abuse is sadly a theme that runs through these young people’s lives. That is why I hope the forthcoming domestic abuse Bill will have an immediate impact not just on violence committed in people’s homes but on the local level.
longer-term consequences of ensuring that children do not witness such violence and abuse in what should be their ultimate place of safety—their home. That can have long-term adverse impacts in their adult and teenage years.

The serious violence strategy sets out our understanding of recent increases in serious violence, our analysis of the trends and drivers, as well as the risks, and the protective factors that can help to tackle them. As a result, it places a new emphasis on early intervention and prevention, and it aims to tackle the root causes of the problem, alongside ensuring a robust law enforcement response.

The strategy sets out our response under four key themes: tackling county lines and the misuse of drugs; early intervention and prevention; supporting communities and local partnerships; and the law enforcement and criminal justice response. The strategy is very clear that tackling serious violence is not a law enforcement issue alone and that it requires a multi-agency approach involving a range of organisations, partners and agencies, including education, health, social services, housing and youth services. It supports a public health approach to tackling serious violence, which I suspect has the support of the House.

**Vicky Foxcroft**: Does the Minister share my disappointment that we do not have Ministers here listening to the debate from all those other Departments, which are so integral to delivering a public health approach?

**Victoria Atkins**: I always enjoy the company of my colleagues on the Treasury Bench. In fairness, those Ministers may not be here today, but they are there at meetings of the serious violence taskforce, the inter-ministerial group on serious violence and the inter-ministerial group on the first two years of life. There is a great deal of Whitehall involvement, and there has to be, because we have to ensure that all relevant Government Departments, at both national and local level, are involved if we are to provide a wrap-around approach to tackling violence.

The trends and analysis show that this violence is based around male-on-male offending, alongside a shift to younger offenders. Young black men are disproportionately represented as both victims and perpetrators, and although the rise in violence is national, particular communities are being disproportionately hurt by this terrible violence. The strategy is clear that a range of factors are likely to be driving the rise in serious violence, but the most notable driver is the drugs market.

Crack cocaine markets have strong links to serious violence, supported by the growth in county lines, which is also strongly linked to violence. The latest evidence suggests that crack use is rising in England and Wales and that county lines drug dealing, which is associated with hard class A drugs, has spread.

**Sarah Jones** (Croydon Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the work she is doing and for always being available when we want to speak to her, which is appreciated.

It is true that the increase in drug use is driving some of these issues, but at least three quarters of knife crime is not gang-related in that way. People are carrying knives and getting involved in knife crime for completely different reasons, and it is important that we bear that in mind as we look at the evidence.

**Victoria Atkins**: The hon. Lady, who has done so much work in her constituency and in the House on knife crime, not least through chairing the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime, is absolutely right. Sadly, we know that more young people are carrying knives because they think, wrongly, that it will offer them protection. That is where education is critical.

I am extremely grateful for the work the APPG and the associated charities are doing to try to educate young people. One has only to visit the Ben Kinsella Trust, for example, to see the powerful message it delivers, as one makes one’s way around the exhibition, that carrying a knife simply does not offer such protection. Indeed, many young people are killed by their own knives. That is very much part of the early intervention work, which I will outline in detail.

Social media is a driving force in serious violence and in escalating gang violence, due to the reaction of young people to supposed signs of disrespect or, indeed, encouragements to commit violence. A range of risk factors can affect a person’s vulnerability and susceptibility to becoming a victim or perpetrator of serious violence through a range of adverse childhood experiences, such as domestic abuse, truancy and exclusion. The strategy also sets out the evidence and support for targeted interventions that can help to mitigate, and protect children and young people from, these factors.

I will talk first about tackling county lines and the misuse of drugs, because county lines is the first of the four key areas of action set out in our strategy. County lines is a horrific form of child criminal exploitation, and it involves high levels of violence. I am grateful to colleagues on both sides of the House for raising awareness of county lines. Sadly, in the last year or so, we have all become families, with county lines, and it is precisely because of the questions posed in debates in this place, as well as a very informed campaign by the police and others, that the public are now much more aware of this type of crime.

We have a cross-Government programme of action to tackle county lines, which includes investing £3.6 million to establish a new national county lines co-ordination centre to enhance our intelligence capability and to support cross-border working to disrupt county lines criminality, while also ensuring that vulnerable children and young people are identified and safeguarded.

The new centre became fully operational in September, and it carried out its first week of intensification, to use the police terminology, in October, which resulted in 405 arrests and 320 individuals being safeguarded. That is an extraordinary amount of work in one week, and it shows the scale of the challenge to policing and social services colleagues. The serious violence strategy sets out further measures we will take to enhance our response to drugs, building on the drugs strategy of 2017 and providing further support in targeted areas, such as through heroin and cocaine action areas.

As has already been mentioned, the evidence to support early intervention is set out in our strategy, and a focus on early intervention and prevention is at the heart of a
public health approach. That is why we have already delivered on our early intervention youth fund, allocating £17.7 million to 29 projects that will focus on diverting vulnerable young people and those who have already offended away from crime. The projects, supported by police and crime commissioners across England and Wales, will work with young people who are already involved in criminality or who have already offended, and with organisations safeguarding those at risk of gang exploitation and county lines, to deliver interventions and with organisations safeguarding those at risk of criminality or who have already offended, and with organisations safeguarding those at risk of gang exploitation and county lines, to deliver interventions to help them into positive life choices. Earlier this year, we also launched a major social media advertising campaign aimed at teenagers, #knifefree, to raise awareness of the consequences of knife crime and discourage young people from carrying knives. That has been supported with the creation of a #knifefree lesson plan and resources for teachers to use in schools.

As I have said previously, a multi-agency approach and local partnerships are vital. That is why we placed PCCs at the heart of our early intervention youth fund and why we are running a series of engagement events for interested and relevant agencies and partners across England and Wales. The aim of the events is to increase awareness of the strategy’s key messages and actions, and understand what action is being taken locally. The events allow partners to share good practice and feedback on further support and what further action needs to be taken. Three events have already taken place in London, Luton and Bristol, and at least 10 further events will take place next year. I have attended one of them and there are very powerful programmes, allowing people to give good advice and to ask questions to improve their local response. We have also made available funding of £1.5 million for 68 projects from the anti-knife crime community fund. The funding supports communities to tackle knife crime, including through early intervention and education, as well as mentoring and outreach work. I hope hon. Members have received letters from me informing them of local projects that have received those donations.

Finally, the strategy sets out further action we will take to enhance the law enforcement and criminal justice response, including tackling social media and continued targeted action on knife crime. On 17 June, the Home Secretary announced funding of £1.4 million to support a new national police capability to tackle gang-related activity on social media. This new police “hub” will be fully operationally next year and will focus on disrupting gang criminality online, as well as identifying and referring more content to social media companies to be removed. In addition, we are taking action to ensure the police have all the powers they need to tackle violent crime. We have introduced a new Offensive Weapons Bill to strengthen our legislation on knives, corrosive substances and firearms. The Bill has completed its passage through this House and had its First Reading in the House of Lords on 29 November. We have continued to encourage police forces to undertake a series of co-ordinated national weeks of action against knife crime under Operation Sceptre. The last operation was in September, when all 43 forces in England and Wales took part, as well as British Transport police. Our newly published serious and organised crime strategy also sets out a framework for how we will use our national, regional and local capabilities to disrupt and target serious violence activity through county lines, for example.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Will the Minister, in her conversations, encourage the police to use the powers they have? Let me give one example on this. A gang who were glorifying violence were convicted and banned from making any music videos—putting them online—unless the police gave their approval. The police then approved one video that had shocking lyrics glorifying gun violence. No wonder campaigners have their head in their hands when the police make decisions such as that.

Victoria Atkins: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I was grateful for the particular interest he took in the Offensive Weapons Bill. I am not familiar with the case he has raised, but if he provides me with the details, I will certainly look into it. When the police ask us for powers we do our level best to provide them, but I, too, would like to see those powers used sensibly when they are provided.

Sarah Jones: I want to caution against being too flippan when it comes to social media. There are big issues to address, but a lot of music that is online, drill music and stuff on YouTube, in particular, is an expression of an environment in which people find themselves, not an expression of intent. That is where the difference lies and that is what the police have to tackle. Someone expressing what is around in their community, what they see and their lived experience is very different from someone expressing intent to do something—that is the difference.

Victoria Atkins: I listen to and consider that with great care, but I must make the point that I would like to support our young people and give them the reassurance that if they do not want to be listening to or watching videos that are incredibly violent—as I say, I am not familiar with the example my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) provided—we can take a stand and say, “Actually, we don’t want to see those levels of violence online, because it helps feed a narrative and a very negative atmosphere for our young people.” This is one of the debates we will continue to have, not least through the introduction of the online harms White Paper, and in the context of not just serious violence, but depictions of women in music videos. This is one of the big debates of our time, but I would not want our young people to think that we feel it is okay for music videos to be targeting them with images of extreme violence, with foul language and with foul depictions. We should be doing a bit better than that for our young people.

Huw Merriman: I will indeed write to my hon. Friend, but I should make it absolutely clear that I was not talking about an “environmental issue” and I am not a prude; this video referred to taking a gun, going into a block and using it, pop by pop—and the rest. So this is shocking stuff. The other point I wish to make is that TimWestwoodTV is still on YouTube. There are 32 examples where breaches of the law have been found, with glorifications of violence and misogyny and shocking lyrics about gun and drug use. Some 100,000 people watch each of these videos. He is an absolute disgrace, but so is YouTube for even hosting him.
Victoria Atkins: We are tackling this through our social media hub and through the serious violence taskforce. These issues are very difficult and they need to be debated, not only by us in this place, but by the wider communities. As a mum, I know that one wants to protect one’s child and one would hope they are not accessing and seeing material such as that. We have to tread carefully around this, because one does not want, for a moment, to step over into the boundaries of musical freedom. However, we have to be a little less forgiving of those who present these very violent images on TV and then shrug their shoulders when we think it is having an impact on how our children view each other and their friends, and how they view situations in their day-to-day lives.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Victoria Atkins: I will give way, but this will be the last time, as I must move on.

Stella Creasy: I thank the Minister for giving way. I recognise the debate that people want to have. With the greatest respect to all my colleagues across the House, I do not think this is really about whether we are prudes. Whatever material our young people are seeing, and whether they are seeing violence online or on our streets, the biggest difference is made by their having people in their lives who can be a consistent voice for making positive choices. I understand that there is an obsession with what is on YouTube, but will the Minister say a bit about how she wants to support those youth mentors and social workers that we know we need to be able to crack this problem? That is what this debate is really about today.

Victoria Atkins: It is as though the hon. Lady had my speech in front of her, because I am just about to move on to the further work that we have announced in recent months. Of course, having positive role models is key, particularly for young people with the biggest set of vulnerabilities, who perhaps do not have someone at home on whom they can rely. That may be because their home lives are difficult and chaotic, for reasons that we have heard about earlier in the debate. There is already a programme of work: the Home Office supports charities such as Safer London and the St Giles Trust to do innovative work to try to reach and then keep hold of the young people who most need their help.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Victoria Atkins: I am not going to, I am afraid, because I must make progress.

It has been a great pleasure for me, as part of my role, to meet youth workers and discover what they think will most help their young people. We in the Government are then in a position to help them in their work.

On 2 October, the Home Secretary announced additional major new measures to tackle violent crime. First, he announced a consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach to tackling serious violence. This would mean that police officers, education partners, local authority and healthcare professionals would have a new legal duty to take action and prevent violent crime, and fundamentally support our public health approach. The consultation will be a fundamental change in our approach—indeed, it will go further than the often-given example of Glasgow—and I will be very interested to see the results.

Secondly, the Home Secretary announced a new £200 million youth endowment fund, which will be delivered over 10 years and will support interventions with children and young people who are at risk of involvement in crime and violence. It will focus on those who are most at risk, such as those who display signs of truancy, aggression and involvement in antisocial behaviour. It will fund interventions to steer children and young people away from becoming serious offenders. Because we are delivering this £200 million over 10 years, it will provide longer-term certainty to those organisations that are helped through the fund, so that they can develop their programmes.

Thirdly, the Home Secretary announced the independent review of drug misuse, which will ensure that law-enforcement agencies are targeting and preventing the drug-related causes of violent crime effectively. Drugs have been identified as a major driver of serious violence. The review will consider recreational drug use, as well as use by the smaller number of users who cause the most harm to themselves and their communities.

Let me be clear: tackling serious violence is a top priority for the Government. The approach set out in the serious violence strategy, with a greater emphasis on early intervention, will address violent crime and help young people to develop the skills and resilience to live happy and productive lives away from violence. But we cannot deliver that alone, which is why we are supporting a multi-agency public health approach to tackling the issue and investing heavily in tackling the root causes of the problem and consulting on further measures to underpin the public health approach, to ensure that everyone is working collectively to stop this violence.

2.43 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I am very glad indeed to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I do not doubt the Minister’s sincerity, but there are some in the wider community who believe that in many important ways the Government are only paying lip service to a public health approach to violent crime.

Like other Members, I have had the sad duty of visiting the families of young men who have died as a result of violent crime. I say young men because they are nearly always men—and in London at least they are all too often black and minority ethnic men. Visiting the families of these deceased young men brings it home to you that the deceased were people—someone’s child. Not just a statistic or a newspaper clipping but young people who were loved and often carried the hopes and dreams of their parents, wider family and even church community. Violent crime creates fear generally, but we should always remember that it is also a personal tragedy for families and communities. Tonight, too many mothers will be going to bed worrying about that call from the public services that will tell them that their son will not be coming home alive.

The topic of the debate is youth involvement in violent crime, but we should remember that older people commit violent crime, too. Violent crime committed against and perpetrated by young people is hugely
emotive, and the argument about catching them young and diverting them from crime is well understood, but as I have said, young people are not the sole perpetrators of violent crime; far from it. Youth violence is often associated with drug gangs, which are often run by very adult Mr Bigs—organised criminals who try to keep their hands clean. The Minister talked about county lines; as we know, violence—sometimes extreme violence—is used to claim and enforce operations and territory, drug debts and so on. The organisers and ultimate beneficiaries of the county line phenomenon are rarely young people.

It is important to set out the real nature of the problem, because the Government—although not necessarily this Minister—sometimes seem in denial on matters relating to policing and crime. These are the facts: in the latest report from the Office for National Statistics on crime in the year ending in June, there were more than 39,300 incidents of police recorded crime using knives or other sharp instruments, compared with more than 30,600 as of March 2011. In reality, violent crime and knife crime are rising under this Government. As was said earlier, we can call it a spike if we like, but it can only really be described as a spike if we see the level of violent crime start to come down.

The same ONS document says:

"As offences involving the use of weapons are relatively low in volume, the Crime Survey for England and Wales...is not able to provide reliable trends for such incidents. In this case, police recorded crime is a useful source for measuring these offences, although not all offences will come to the attention of the police."

The ONS goes on to say that we now have the:

"Highest number of offences involving knives or sharp instruments since 2011".

So, the reality is that knife crime has risen while this Government have been in office, but what has their policy response been?

We have to accept that one of the most vital elements in the fight against crime must be the role and strength of our police force. We know that 50,000 workers have been lost from the police service, 21,000 of whom were police officers. Up until recent times, the Government have been demanding that they do “more with less” and they are now at crisis point. Those are not my words; they are not some tribal assertion. They are the words of Chief Superintendent Gavin Thomas from the College of Policing writing in The Daily Telegraph at the end of October. He is simply highlighting what all of the police leadership has said and the clear verdict of the National Audit Office, the Home Affairs Committee, the inspectorate and many others besides.

Let us consider for a moment the real effect of slashing the numbers of what are known sometimes a little disparagingly as back-office staff. They do vital work, and when their numbers have been slashed, all of their work falls on the police officers themselves. I invite the Minister to imagine how she would feel if her support staff was halved or reduced to a 10th. Well, police, just like the Minister, are dealing with very serious matters—matters of life and death—and we expect them to manage with cuts in the number of staff who support them.

According to the Home Office’s own data, the number of full-time frontline police officers has fallen from 123,000 in 2010 to 106,000 in 2017. All of this has undermined police officers’ effectiveness—that is being said not just by Labour Members but by police officers themselves—in preventing and detecting crime and in apprehending criminals when crime does occur. It is also increasingly the case that police officers do not have the time to spend on protective engagement with the public, but that protective engagement with communities is particularly important in relation to youth crime.

Fewer police officers do not inevitably lead to more crime. Some criminals, opportunistically or otherwise, may be encouraged by the lack of police visibility, and there has certainly been a sharp decline in arrest rates. But although fewer police do not lead directly to rising crime, including violent crime, the police tend to become overstretched, which means that they cannot cope with current levels of crime, let alone rising crime. I am arguing not that fewer police officers in themselves lead to more crime, but that we have to look elsewhere for the causes of crime.

I have heard the Minister talk about the Government’s commissions, strategies, and legislation, and I am grateful that she is not talking about just arresting our way out of rising violent crime. Police officers tell me exactly the opposite; that we cannot arrest our way out of this crisis. I am told by officers of one instance in which an entire drug gang, which had been dominating the area, were sent away for lengthy sentences. They had used frequent and extreme violence to enforce their rule and protect their territory. There was some jubilation in the local police station when the gang members were sent away, but the consequence was a huge upsurge in violence as other gangs moved in. We must tackle the causes of violent crime. Although I have heard what the Minister has had to say, as I said right at the beginning, the Government as a whole run the risk of being seen to pay lip service to a public health approach.

Let us reflect on a genuine public health approach to violent crime. This is the work done in Scotland around knife crime—I am sure that our Scottish colleagues will have more to say on this. Between April 2006 and April 2011, 40 children and teenagers were killed in homicides involving a knife in Scotland, but between 2011 and 2016, that figure fell to just eight. The decline was steepest in Glasgow, which once had one of the highest murder rates in western Europe. Between 2006 and 2011, 15 children and teenagers were killed with knives in Glasgow, but between April 2011 and April 2016, not a single child was killed with a knife in Glasgow.

What was the content of the public health approach to knife crime in Glasgow? The police did play a central role. Legislation was improved and toughened, but the authorities also worked in a multi-agency fashion, working very closely with the NHS, schools and social workers. They also had some very innovative projects. In one, the violence reduction unit identified those people most likely to offend and asked them to voluntarily attend the sheriff’s court. They did not have to come, but they were encouraged to do so by community police, teachers and social workers. The police had mapped all the gangs in the area, so that when the young men got there, they saw their own pictures up in court. The session started off with a warning: “We know who you are, and if you carry on with this lifestyle we’re going to come down on you really hard. We’re going to arrest you and we’ll arrest the rest of the gang. You will be
policing. This should be resisted by all sensible people.

The police spoke to the young men about the injuries they see as a result of violence, and had a mother talk about losing her son. That really hit home. There was help with housing, relocation, employment and training, and the young men were given a number to call if they wanted to take the offer up. Many of them did so and were put into the programme, and aren’t longer in the gang lifestyle. That is just one project, which was carried out in Glasgow.

I have heard what the Minister has said about this pot of money and that pot of money, but in order to replicate that sort of approach and those sorts of innovative projects, much more resource needs to be put into the public sector across the board, notably into the NHS, local authorities, schools and social workers.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments about Glasgow. As a local councillor in Glasgow at the time, I saw the difference made by the community initiative to reduce violence. I sat in on one of the court call-ins, which was as moving as she said it was. However, does she agree that the success of the Glasgow programme has been its consistency—that it has been funded for the long-term? That is the kind of investment needed to make it a success.

Ms Abbott: I thank the hon. Lady for her important intervention; I expected Scottish colleagues to amplify my remarks. She is exactly right. It is not about a commission or a pot of money. It is about a sustained investment, year on year, not just into policing, but into the public sector services that the police need to work alongside to make the public health approach work.

We have heard about the Government’s commission, working parties and policy documents, but the reality is that police numbers have gone down. The idea that we heard earlier this afternoon, that the Government are going to make good some of the drops in police funding by increasing taxes—the precept is a regressive tax paid by householders—is yet another austerity measure, with ordinary people in some of our poorest communities paying for the Government’s failure on policing.

There are other serious and concerning changes to policing; I have called it the Americanisation of our policing. This should be resisted by all sensible people. Of all the advanced, industrialised countries, the American system of policing is the last one we should emulate. The Government have encouraged the increased use of non-evidence-based stop and search, as well as knocking suspected muggers—I stress that these are suspects—off their mopeds with police cars. There is also talk about the use of routine armed patrols in certain areas of London—we know which areas they will be—will increase community co-operation.

A holistic public health approach would mean police forces such as the Metropolitan police working closely with schools, social workers, the NHS, youth services and housing services consistently over a period of time. The Minister talks about individual projects, but all this provision is being cut because of austerity. Far from having the capacity to innovate, the public sector is under pressure just to maintain the services it already provides.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Is the shadow Home Secretary aware of the work being done in Scotland by the violence reduction unit, with mentors going into schools for violence prevention sessions? That is raising the skills and confidence of school pupils in challenging threatening and abusive behaviour.

Ms Abbott: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Similar projects are happening in some parts of London, but we are not doing it in the consistent way that the violence reduction unit in Scotland is doing it.

Let me say a little more about the underlying causes of crime. The recent report by the Social Mobility Commission, an advisory non-departmental public body to the Department for Education, highlights how poor the outlook is generally for young people. It is something of an indictment of this Government, conscious of what was said when the current Prime Minister took up office, that they have not tackled burning injustices for young people—they have created more injustices and exacerbated them. Under this Government, every aspect of young people’s lives, and every underlying cause of crime, has got worse. Sure Start has been savaged, the schools budget has been cut in real terms and per pupil, and school exclusions have risen. There is a very real connection between high levels of school exclusion and children ending up in pupil referral units, too many of which, sadly, despite the best efforts of people who work in them, are academies for crime. Housing has deteriorated, access to universities has worsened, the education maintenance allowance has been cut, fees have risen, and zero-hours contracts have increased—and those are often aimed at young people. As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked after the Budget of 2011, “What have the Tories got against young people?”

All of this has consequences. The correlation between sharply lower living standards, worsening prospects, increased hopelessness and rising crime is well established. It is so well established as to have a causal element. The House should not just take my word for it. Metropolitan Police assistant chief commissioner Patricia Gallan, who spearheads Scotland Yard’s specialist crime operations in the fight against gun crime, homicides and high-harm and high-profile crimes, said:

“If we don’t invest at the beginning” of children’s lives

“we’ll have to invest…in terms of criminal justice and in the prison system.”

Chuka Umunna: My right hon. Friend’s point about investment is absolutely key. If we invest in the early stages—I accept that this is not just a case of money,
but ultimately money is an issue—we will save money for the public sector in the future. She talked about pupil referral units. It costs over £30,000 to put a young person through a PRU; if they are in mainstream education, it costs £5,000 to £6,000. If we invest to prevent them from getting wrapped up in the violence that leads to their being in the PRU, we will save money at the end of the day—although we should not be putting a price on the heads of our young people.

Ms Abbott: I thank my hon. Friend for his important intervention.

Nick Alston, the former Conservative police and crime commissioner for Essex, has said that austerity has had a negative impact on crime. The reality is that too many of this Government’s policies, particularly austerity, have exacerbated some of the underlying causes of the drift to criminality in our young people.

The issue of drill music has been raised. The Minister will be aware that, for as long as anyone can remember, people have sought to blame the music that young people listen to for their bad behaviour. Much of the drill music and videos are horrifying and appalling, but at the end of the day, the music is a reflection of those young people’s lives and realities. It is not a cause of violent crime.

Victoria Atkins: To clarify, I was not claiming that the music causes serious violence. From a safeguarding perspective, and as mums, surely we want to keep our children safe and protect them. We need to have a debate about what sort of music and videos we, as mothers, want our children to be listening to and watching. At the moment, I do not know where that line is. There are clear cases where violence has been incited. I appreciate that there is a grey area, and there may be terminology that we do not like, but do we, as mums, still want our children to be watching those videos? That is the point I was making.

Ms Abbott: As a mother, let me gently tell the Minister that what we want our children to view online and what they actually view online are two different things. If she is concerned about safeguarding children, maybe she should spend some time lobbying Education Ministers to make more money available for education, particularly in the areas with the biggest incidence of violent youth crime.

We respect the Minister’s genuineness, but we feel that the Government have not done enough to promote a genuine public health approach to violent crime, let alone fund it. They mouth the phrase, and they set up committees and commissions, but in reality, their policies tend more towards an Americanisation of our police and the notion that we can arrest our way out of this crisis than the public health approach, which we have seen successfully implemented in other nations of Britain.

To our police officers—the women and men we rely on to uphold the law—I want to say this: we respect the work you do, and we are grateful for the way you put your lives at risk fighting crime, including violent crime, but we urge you not to be taken in by this Government. They are not defending you; they are cutting your numbers. They are not defending you when they ask you to go on routine armed patrols.

Let us have a serious discussion about tackling violent crime, addressing the causes of crime and what our actual police needs are and how to meet them. Above all, I look forward to an ongoing debate about what a real public health approach to policing would be. I would welcome never again having to meet a mother whose son has died because of violent crime. After all, if we in this House cannot take practical measures to protect young people and communities from violent crime, what are we doing?

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. It will be obvious to the House that a great many Members wish to speak, and we have only until 5 o’clock. I hope we can manage without a formal time limit. We will be able to do so if everybody keeps to under nine minutes. That means doing arithmetic in looking at the clock. If I said 10 minutes, it would be easier. You would be amazed at the number of people who cannot add nine to the time on the clock when they start or who are incapable of working out how long they have. I put it to Members that this is a competition to see who is best at counting. If anyone takes more than nine minutes, it will be assumed not that they had an awful lot to say that was terribly important, but that they simply cannot do arithmetic. It is a challenge, and we will start with Mr Jack Brereton.

3.9 pm

Jack Brereton (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Con): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate. I am sorry to have to say that, unfortunately, youth violence has been on the rise in parts of my constituency over the past year—not on the scale of what has happened in London, of course, but the Meir area of my constituency now has the highest level of antisocial behaviour in the whole of Staffordshire, much of which is caused by gangs of youngsters. Over the past 12 months, there has been a massive rise in these incidents compared with previous years; in some months there has been nearly a quadrupling. These gangs are terrorising our community with totally unacceptable behaviour, and we have even seen a number of shocking knife and firearms incidents in recent months.

These issues are not reserved to the Meir area. In Fenton, we have also of late seen some unacceptable antisocial behaviour and drug-related crimes by a few individuals, whose destructive behaviour I am determined to see stamped out. It cannot be right that a few individuals are allowed to intimidate the majority of law-abiding citizens. The vast majority of our constituents, including young people, are well-minded and full of opportunity, and they make a huge contribution to our society. They do not deserve to grow up in an environment of crime that destroys families and life chances. I am pleased that the Minister mentioned domestic violence, since too many young people in Stoke-on-Trent South are being exposed to that at home. A whole catalogue of totally unacceptable behaviours are being committed by a small number of people.

In Meir, the gang is directing violence especially against local shops and businesses in the centre of the community. People are fearful to go and use those facilities, and staff face daily intimidation just in doing their job. I recently went out on patrol with Staffordshire police and spoke to residents and businesses about the
issues they are experiencing. The local KFC, for example, had a whole book of incidents over the past month, recording the all too frequent experiences of lawlessness. I think of the young member of staff—only 18 or 19 herself—who has to put up with horrific intimidation in her place of work. No one should have to put up with that when just trying to do their job.

These hardened gang members are actually children—13, 14, 15 or 16, and sometimes even younger. They are not yet of the age of criminal maturity, which means that there has often been little or no response and the totally unacceptable behaviour of these individuals continues. However, it is now well recognised that these issues can be addressed only by taking a multi-agency, multi-pronged approach. This is now very well recognised in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire.

In the past few weeks, Staffordshire police has made addressing these challenges in Meir one of its highest priorities. This means taking action, and a number of orders have recently been served or are about to be served on some of the young people involved. However, we cannot let the police tackle these issues alone; nor is that desirable. We must ensure that parents take responsibility for their children. Stoke-on-Trent City Council has a significant role to play in taking action, and I am pleased that it is taking up the baton. In particular, it has powers that can be used against those who repeatedly breach tenancy agreements and those with repeated cases of truancy.

However, the reality is that we need a much broader approach even than that. I am incredibly pleased that the Government have recognised that in calling the debate, and it is important that we take a robust approach. I was pleased that the Minister set out a number of measures that the Government are now taking on the ground. We need to take much more proactive action involving a whole range of public, private and voluntary organisations to ensure an absolute focus on a preventive approach to tackling the root causes.

As has been mentioned, there is also a huge financial incentive to do so for organisations such as the police, local councils and health services. Vast amounts of taxpayers’ money currently goes to addressing the consequences of antisocial behaviour and criminality caused by gangs. A small number of individuals and families are often passed from service to service without issues ever being fully addressed. As these young people get older and turn to more hardened criminality, the costs will only rise further, and more taxpayers’ money will be wasted without any of the beneficial results of actually addressing the problems.

If only a proportion of that investment was redirected into more preventive work to stop young people being drawn into gangs, just think what could be saved in the long run and how the lives of these young people could be transformed. Many say that there is a real lack of facilities and distractions for young people, especially in the Meir community. I tend to agree, and that is why I have recently been working with Ormiston Meridian Academy to secure a new 3G football pitch. It is essential that we secure the funding we need to deliver that, and I was pleased to meet the Football Foundation last week to discuss the significant benefits of such a facility, which will help to ensure that there are activities in our community. I also launched a petition with the principal, Gareth Jones, to demonstrate to the Football Foundation the community support for the project.

Having a 3G pitch in Meir would help not only to reduce the draw of gangs but to address the significant lack of such facilities in Stoke-on-Trent South. I was pleased recently to work closely with St Thomas More Catholic Academy to secure a similar facility in the Longton area, which again helps to meet the massive demand for sporting facilities, especially 3G pitches. I hope that in future we will also have such a facility at Trentham High at the other end of my constituency.

Improving sports facilities demonstrates the massive impact that improving fitness and encouraging healthier lifestyles can have on reducing antisocial behaviour and crime more broadly. The role that sport—not just football—can have is dramatic, as it gives young people a focus, provides discipline and provokes aspirations. It also helps bring together differing cross-sections of the community, and in the most disadvantaged parts of my constituency such as Meir, it helps young people to transform their lives and achieve their full potential.

Our country cannot afford to lose young people on a path towards a life of criminality. We need our future generation, which includes every young person, to be equipped with the ability and skills needed to contribute to our industries, economy and society in Stoke-on-Trent. As we near full levels of employment, ensuring that our future generations fill important roles and jobs will be essential if we are to continue to build on the economic successes we have seen thanks to the work of local businesses and Conservative policies in government.

If we are to overcome the productivity challenges we face, further accelerate growth and build prosperity for every young person in the country, communities such as Meir will play a vital part. If we allow young people to succumb to gangs, criminality and aggression in the way we are seeing, we will have failed those young people. It can never be right for a young person in our country to feel that their community is not for them, or to be so blinded by their upbringing that they are unable to see a pathway that works.

This issue goes to the heart of why I am a Conservative: in a modern, global Britain, every child and young person must have equality of opportunity to achieve their full potential. We must continue to focus on that, working with our communities to overcome challenges. Of course we must use the full range of enforcement measures to show that there are consequences for those who behave in the way we are discussing, but we must also do much more to solve and address the root causes behind why young people are attracted to gangs in the first place.

3.17 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) and to take part in this debate. A number of hon. Members have been pressing for a debate on this subject for some time, particularly the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I pay tribute to her and her fellow commissioners on the Youth Violence Commission, including my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), as well as other hon. Members present today who have a long track record of campaigning on this issue—I am not surprised to see a couple of former colleagues from the Home Affairs Committee.
The Committee, on which I still sit, recently commenced an inquiry into serious violence, and we started by taking evidence from parents who had lost their children to youth violence. One said to us:

“As a mum, when you have a child the child then becomes your world. When they are taken away from you in this senseless manner, your whole world just rips apart”.

As the shadow Home Secretary powerfully pointed out, such testimonies bring home the disastrous and tragic impact of this type of crime better than any statistics.

The Scottish National party supports the call for a public health approach to be front and centre of efforts to tackle youth violence. Such an approach seeks to improve the health and safety of all individuals by addressing underlying risk factors that increase the likelihood of people becoming a victim or perpetrator of violence. Only by tackling the causes of violence and not just its symptoms, and by using a whole systems approach, can we break the cycle of violence and reduce its impact on individuals, their families and communities.

A public health approach involves collecting evidence on the causes of violence, using that evidence to design interventions, and then testing, improving and upskilling them. By doing that we will achieve so much more than if we simply respond after the event through the justice system. We know it can work, because, as we have heard, it has delivered significant progress in Scotland. It was introduced there because the evidence showed it working elsewhere—in the USA, and in Chicago in particular.

None of that is to say that we still do not have a long, long way to go, but it is hard to overstate just how difficult a starting point Scotland had when it set off on this approach. As recently as 2005, one UN report declared Scotland the most violent country in the developed world, while Wirth Health Organisation statistics suggested that Glasgow was the murder capital of Europe—thankfully no more. The shadow Home Secretary mentioned some of the significant progress that has been made: violent crime in Scotland fell by almost half between 2006-07 and 2016-17; the homicide rate halved between 2008 and 2018; offending by young people has halved since 2008; there was a fall of almost 78% in the number of under-18-year-olds being prosecuted in court since 2006-7; the number of children referred to the children’s hearings system on offence grounds fell by 83%; and hospital admissions in Glasgow due to assault with sharp objects are down 62%. By any measure, that is pretty remarkable progress.

A good number of Members, in previous debates as well as in this one, have highlighted the work of the violence reduction unit in Glasgow. I too want to pay tribute to if for the transformational work it has undertaken. I would also like to pay tribute to other organisations, such as Medics against Violence, and those implementing programmes such as “No Knives, Better Lives” and the mentors in violence prevention scheme. Building on the progress that had been made, the Scottish Government’s 2008 “Preventing Offending by Young People: Framework for Action” document reflected a significant policy shift towards prevention and early intervention, and support to manage risk and build community confidence. That has been developed further in the most recent youth justice strategy for 2015 to 2020, “Preventing Offending: Getting it right for children and young people”. That strategy seeks to ensure that all agencies that come into contact with children and young people who offend work together, putting a whole systems approach into practice. It seeks to establish a secure care national adviser post to carry out an independent review of secure care. It will also fund the Centre for Youth and Criminal Justice at the University of Strathclyde to develop, support and understand youth justice practice, policy and research in Scotland.

In practical terms, those combined strategies deliver on the ground, with early and effective intervention; opportunities to divert from prosecution; court support; community alternatives to secure care and custody; and improvements to reintegration back into the community. They are about improving life chances with a focus on school inclusion, strengthening relationships and engagement, mentoring, building life skills, and improving health and wellbeing. There is a huge amount of work still to be done, as I have said, including on employability, especially for those who have ended up in the criminal justice system, but progress is being made.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a testament to the impact of this approach on Glasgow that there are four Glasgow MPs here in the Chamber to support my hon. Friend’s speech. He is right to mention some of the strategies in place at a national and Government level, but will he join me in paying tribute to Urban Fox in Lilybank, one of the organisations in my constituency? Michael McCourt, Debbie and the team do an excellent job, delivering diversionary activities to ensure that young people make positive choices to get into a slightly better pattern of life.

Stuart C. McDonald (Glasgow North) (SNP): I agree entirely with what my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) said. We can all think of similar initiatives in our own constituencies. The Children’s Wood in Glasgow North primarily supports teenagers who start to engage in antisocial behaviour. Instead of just calling the police to get them taken away, local volunteers went out and worked with them. Now those same teenagers, instead of being involved in antisocial behaviour, are active parts of that community. That preventive strategy is seen at all levels.

Stuart C. McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, which highlights another very useful and innovative community response.

Both the Minister and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) mentioned the impact of adverse childhood experiences—ACEs. More recently, and significantly, this has been an increasing focus of Scottish Government policy. There is increasingly convincing evidence about how certain adverse childhood experiences can result in long-term effects on learning, health and behaviour. Remarkable research in Wales found that people who reported experiencing four or more ACEs are 15 times more likely to have committed violence, 14 times more likely to have been victim of violence in the past 12 months, and 20 times more likely to have
been in prison at some point in their life. Many other studies show similar links, so working to prevent ACEs at all and to build resilience for those who have already experienced them now underpins policies in all areas. An ACEs hub, co-ordinated by NHS Health Scotland, is progressing national action, and the implications for justice policy are now reflected in the Government’s “Justice in Scotland: Vision and Priorities” for 2017 to 2020.

While detailed policies cannot simply be transplanted from one community to the next, and each has to be tailored to local need, there is no doubt that the principles behind a public health approach to violent crime, and particularly violent youth crime, are absolutely solid and evidence-based. I welcome, for example, what Mayor Sadiq Khan has done in establishing a violence reduction unit in London.

Similarly, the UK Government’s serious violence strategy includes some welcome steps, including the establishment of the new national county lines co-ordination centre, which the Minister mentioned, and a move towards a public health approach, but there are those who have expressed concern about it. Critics have expressed the belief that it is still overly dominated—certainly, as regards youth justice—by a criminal law enforcement response, with insufficient emphasis on some drivers of serious violence, such as poverty, and insufficient recognition of the impact of trauma on children caught up in serious violence. That is what some critics are concerned about. The Minister is a former colleague from the Home Affairs Committee, and I know that she is absolutely committed to this issue, so I hope that she can bring the Government with her in being able to respond to these questions and criticisms in the best way possible by investing in putting public health front and centre of their ambitions to tackle youth crime.

The Minister also mentioned the Offensive Weapons Bill, which was a welcome, if small step, as I said when we debated it. She mentioned a consultation on a statutory Bill, which was a welcome, if small step, as I said when their ambitions to tackle youth crime.


3.26 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald), although I was rather hoping to follow the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna)—not just because he has an easier constituency to pronounce, but because I will be referring to parts of my life when I worked in his constituency. The Minister mentioned that many Members want to speak about their constituency, but I want to speak primarily about a time in my life when this issue was a real cause and passion, and not to use my voice in this place to carry that on would seem a complete waste.

My time was spent working in a youth organisation in Brixton. It was formed after the Brixton riots of the ’80s, and we had two sites—one was on the Moorlands estate and the other was further down Coldharbour Lane towards Camberwell Green. I spent my time there because, originally, I had worked as a barrister and found myself dealing with a lot of young offenders on the criminal side of things, when it was frankly just too late. By that time, it was hard to change their path, even if they got an order that would allow them to do so, rather than going into custody. I left the Bar and then went into finance, where I was surrounded by people whose life was great. I thought to myself, “I need to put something back and reach out to see where I can help” so that I could stop young people getting into the situation in which I had met them in my previous career.

That is what took me to that organisation as a trustee, fundraiser, staff manager and volunteer, and my goodness, we did some amazing things together. We funded teachers to provide after-school education, particularly for young children who were excluded or were just skipping school. We made it more fun, so that they would actually turn up. We also had a whole range of sports activities, which included horse-riding in inner-city London. We had a huge amount of environmental projects. Our football teams were absolutely fantastic. We basically got kids out of a life where it was all about gang culture and we made it interesting, exciting and gave them something different. To actually see their choices and the paths that they went on, and the success that many of them achieved, despite the odds, was absolutely incredible. I then moved on and spent five years as a governor in a failing school, when I moved to another part of London. Again, it was interesting to see the educational impact and, again, how a situation could be transformed through great leadership, great funding and everyone working together. That is what brought me here.

This morning, I tried to track down that organisation, and while doing so, I ended up speaking to a remarkable person, who I think is just outside the hon. Gentleman’s constituency in Denmark Hill. It was interesting chatting to that community and family worker about how things are now compared with how they were when I was there in the five years from 1997 to 2002. It confirmed to me that things have got worse, which is so depressing. She feels that young children are more at risk than they were when I was there, and talked about the impact of smartphones and the fact that people can get their gang together quickly—it is so fast and people do not get the chance to think, “What am I doing?” and turn around. She specifically mentioned the music lyrics, which she believes incite young people to commit violence. I heard what the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) said, but when I speak to people such as that lady, who is on the frontline—she has kids and sees it—they tell me that they absolutely believe that it causes others to follow and glamorises that culture. That is why I say what I say. I am not a big fan of censorship, but when things get this serious, we have to look at it, and do something about it and the people who do it.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I completely and utterly agree with the hon. Gentleman. There have been incidents in my constituency. Drill music went up online from one gang calling out another gang bragging about a murder in the constituency. The music should have been taken down fast but, in my police services did not have the resources they needed to do it, and we did not have the access we needed.
Huw Merriman: We talked a bit about this earlier. I gave an example of when the problem was not police resources—in my example, the police had the power but allowed videos to be published. We heard about police funding earlier. Hopefully, if that was the problem, things might get a little better.

Companies such as YouTube should be forced to take those videos down. I mentioned Tim Westwood. A number of gangs have appeared on his YouTube channel and people have lost their lives. The evidence seems clear to me and I find him to be incredibly irresponsible in how he promotes this music.

The lady I spoke to was interesting. Her youngest is 22 and has gone on to do great things. She said that things have got so bad now that, if he was of primary school age, she would have moved out of London, which makes it incredibly stark. She also made the point that teachers no longer have the respect of pupils. We have spoken before in the House about teachers spending far too much time on too many other matters, which has an impact on their ability to be seen as leaders in the classroom. Youngsters know that they can get away with it. She also gave me a shocking example of young boys who have located here from Nigeria being sent back to keep them safe. It is incredibly frustrating that I spent five years in that area and now find that things are not getting better, but are in fact getting worse, which is why more must be done.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I cannot remember a week in Parliament when I have not heard her say that we need to be talking about this, and we finally are. I had expected to see her name on the Order Paper, but this is a Government debate. I congratulate her.

The question is what to do. I welcome the Government’s £200 million youth endowment fund and note that bidders are being sought. The fund is to be independent, but does that mean independent of profit or independent of the Government? Perhaps it is both.

Victoria Atkins: It is independent of the Government.

Huw Merriman: Right. Therefore it could be profit-based.

Ultimately, as the title of the debate suggests, as experience tells me, and as the shadow Home Secretary said, we cannot arrest our way through this process. It is all about tackling the early signs and making interventions to ensure that we never reach the point at which that young person is arrested, or where there is a victim. I am thinking not only of the victim of a crime, but of the perpetrator, their families, and the hospitals and trauma services—there are so many victims of that one fleeting moment when someone uses a knife. I support the money, but it is critical that it is well spent. We have seen the examples from Glasgow, which is a model we need to follow or at least look at closely because the results have been extraordinary.

Alongside that, I want to press the Minister again because knife crime has got so out of control. The Offensive Weapons Bill is currently going through this House, and I welcome that, but on Report, as the Minister will remember, I supported a couple of amendments tabled by Opposition Members. One was about the ability to get hold of knives. If people shoplift and knives are not in locked cupboards, they have their weapon. The Minister told me that there was a code of practice to which many retailers were signing up, but what worries me is the number of irresponsible retailers who will not do so, and who might even see knives being taken and do nothing about it. I was talking to someone from the Ministry of Justice who had walked past a place—again, I think it was in Streatham—and saw a meat cleaver hanging from a rope.

Let me say to the Minister that if we are not seeing a reduction in this type of crime in six months’ time, I think it would be responsible of our party to look at that amendment again. As I said then, if I decide to kill myself by walking into a shop to buy a packet of cigarettes, I will find that the packets are in a locked cabinet. If I decide to walk into a shop and shoplift a knife to kill someone else, the knife will not be in a locked cabinet, which makes no sense to me at all. Public space protection orders, which the Minister has considered before, might work to that end as well.

The other amendment that I thought had a lot of worth was tabled by the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq). It would make moped use in knife or acid crime an aggravating factor. If there is no reduction in that type of crime, I think that the Government should discuss such a measure.

Let me make one more point. Have I hit nine minutes yet, Madam Deputy Speaker? You will tell me, anyway—or you will just look daggers at me.

I have talked about the constituency of the hon. Member for Streatham, and I will listen with interest to what he has to say about where we are at the moment. The sad reality is, however, that I have covered 200 square miles, largely rural, where I would not necessarily have expected to be dealing with this issue. After I spoke in the Offensive Weapons Bill debate, a constituent reached out to me because her son—she told me, in desperation—had been taking knives, and stealing them as well. She had been told by another parent that their child had been threatened with a knife by her son. He then went missing with the knife. She contacted the police, who said that she would have to wait until the next day to report him as a missing person, and did not take the knife aspect at all seriously or do anything about it.

I take the point about police resourcing, and it is great news that we have additional police resources, but I also think it is incredibly important for all of us, as Members of Parliament, to press our police to ensure that they are doing their job and taking this issue very seriously indeed. While we cannot arrest ourselves out of the situation, when a young person is out there with a knife, the police need to take that seriously and deal with it. It is not a missing person; it is another crime statistic about to happen, and another person about to become a victim.

I will end my speech with that point. I look forward to hearing other contributions.

3.37 pm

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). It is always interesting to hear about Members’ former lives, and about what drove them to come to this place.

Sadly, youth violence, and knife crime in particular, has affected almost every community in the country in recent years, and it is a problem that has reached epidemic levels. Just last month in Coventry, a 16-year-old boy was tragically stabbed to death in the Wood End
area of my constituency. That senseless act cost an innocent young man his life, ruined the lives of his family and friends, and left an entire city in a state of shock. It was yet another tragic example of how knife crime destroys lives and devastates communities.

That shocking event is just the latest in a rising toll of knife crime in the city. Over the last five years the number of knife crime incidents has almost doubled, from 164 in 2012-13 to 307 in 2017-18. There were more than 162 knife crimes in the first six months of 2018-19, with three fatalities in this year alone. The levels of knife crime in my area, and in other areas across the country, are rising, at a time when police budgets have been cut to the bone and the number of frontline police officers has fallen to the lowest level in 30 years. The West Midlands police force alone has lost more than 2,000 officers in the last eight years, and £175 million from its budget over the same period. There can be little doubt about the correlation between falling police numbers and rising crime levels. It is time that the Government finally acknowledged this link and acted to increase the number of officers on our streets to help protect our communities.

All forces need additional officers, and the West Midlands is no different; our PCC has asked the Government for an extra £42.2 million to cover inflation and the funding for 500 additional officers to help tackle violent crime more proactively. It is shameful that the Government failed to meet that request in full.

However, I accept that this problem has not been created by cuts to police budgets alone, nor is it a problem that can be resolved by simply putting extra officers on the streets. If we really want to address this problem permanently, we need to understand the social conditions that lie at the root of youth violence and recognise the underlying causes that have fuelled the recent surge in knife crime. In doing so it is impossible to ignore the cumulative impact of eight years of savage Government cuts to local services, which have exacerbated poverty and inequality, hampered our ability to tackle youth violence at source and pushed communities to a tipping point.

It is certainly no coincidence that areas of high deprivation have similarly high rates of knife crime. In Coventry we have seen cuts to education provision, children and youth services, Sure Start, the police and mental health facilities, all of which have had a direct impact on the most vulnerable in society. Cuts to such vital services not only make it difficult to identify young people who are most at risk of early offending due to their environments, but make it more difficult to address those environments through early intervention. That is why we need a long-term, properly funded, integrated public health approach to youth violence, an approach that focuses on the drivers of youth violence rather than the aftermath and that prioritises the safeguarding and protection of vulnerable young people over criminalisation.

We must ensure that carrying knives never becomes normal behaviour and seek to change the culture among many young people. To do this, we need to place a greater emphasis on community policing that builds trust, education programmes that equip young people to be resilient, and early intervention that targets those most at risk of becoming involved in violence, as well as targeting significant resources on prevention activities on a multi-agency basis. As a result, youth violence would no longer simply be within the purview of the criminal justice system; instead, this would involve the police, schools, parents, health professionals, youth workers and council services working alongside community groups, young people, faith groups and the voluntary sector.

There are already practical examples of this holistic approach taking place in Coventry with the roll-out of youth workers in our local A&E department. Those youth workers intervene at “teachable moments” and speak with young people who attend hospital with a knife wound, as victims often become perpetrators of violent crime—although I think we can all agree that it would be preferable to prevent the violent incident in the first place, rather than act in the aftermath.

There is also investment in mentoring projects and youth work, including through the Positive Youth Foundation in Coventry, to divert young people away from violence. Similarly, there is investment in education programmes that warn young people of the dangers of carrying a knife. We have also seen the introduction of violence prevention mentors—young people who mentor other young people in their schools away from violence.

Such local initiatives really do make a difference to both individuals and communities touched by violence, but they do not in any way negate the need for the Government to adopt a public health approach on a national scale. We need the Government to implement and properly fund a national programme, with measurable outcomes, that targets resources at communities to tackle the problem of youth violence at source while protecting future generations from it. I hope this is something the Government will look at very seriously.

3.44 pm

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I want briefly to talk about the consensus that I hear in the debate, as well as about some of the areas in which there is a divergence of views. I also want to make one or two constructive remarks. Everyone agrees that this is a serious and pressing issue. We cannot just look at the figures, although they are pretty appalling, with homicides and knife deaths at levels not seen for more than a decade. The right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) talked about how meeting the mothers involved really brings it home to you. I have had two fatal stabbings in my constituency in the past two years, and meeting the mothers of the two young men involved was most distressing. I could not leave those meetings without committing myself to take action, and I am sure that everyone in the House has had a similar experience.

There is consensus on the urgency involved, and there is consensus that the old approach of arresting everyone and putting them in prison is not going to work. We have to have a holistic public health approach, and I think that everyone has signed up to that. I refer people to the work of the World Health Organisation on the need for violence prevention and the need to treat this upsurge in violent crime as an epidemic linked to aspects of disease. A public health approach is absolutely right. I also think we can agree on the good work that is being done in communities.

Lyn Brown: I absolutely admire the work that has been done in Glasgow, but this is not the only cause of crime in London. If we continue to focus only on the public health approach, we are likely to miss the way in
which children are being groomed by gang members and organised criminals and placed in harm's way by being used as mules and dealers. We need to understand that, in London, the problem is massive.

Sir Edward Davey: I agree with the hon. Lady, who has taken a great leadership role in this debate. However, the title of the debate is “Public health model to reduce youth violence”, which is why I am focusing on that.

A great deal of cross-party work has been done on this, including the work of the Youth Violence Commission, which the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) chairs. Her ears must be ringing in this debate. Colleagues from all parties are involved in the commission, including the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and for Braintree (James Cleverly) and my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb). My constituent and friend, Siobhan Benita, a former senior civil servant, has also been contributing her skills and knowledge to this cross-party work. There is consensus that this is the way forward.

So where is the disagreement? First, there is disagreement on the speed of the response. I just do not think that we are doing this quickly enough. This is a crisis. Yes, we know that some of the responses involving the public health model are going to be long-term approaches, but there are short-term measures that could happen sooner. Why are we not doing those things ever more quickly? There is a failure to see this crisis for what it is, and to understand how it is experienced by the families in our constituencies.

The other disagreement involves resources. We can always go on about resources and how well they are used—the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) made that point—but let us remember the cost of these appalling tragedies. It is estimated that every homicide costs more than £1 million for the investigation, the autopsy, the coroner’s court and so on. That is before we even talk about how much it costs to lock up the perpetrator, if he or she is caught, and before we have calculated the lost economic opportunity—never mind the emotional value to the family. We are talking about a huge waste of time and resources, as well as about the tragedy and the tears. When we look at resources, let us do our sums right. Let us recognise how much money we are wasting by not tackling this properly. I know that this is a debate that the Treasury sometimes has difficulty in hearing, but we have to give it the seriousness that it deserves. Such solutions are not rocket science, but they are vital.

This has been a constructive debate, and I want to turn to some of the solutions. I am going to make one or two slightly weird suggestions, but people will see their relevance. Some solutions must be targeted and must focus on the individuals and communities at greatest risk, which can be a sensible approach for getting early responses. However, we should also consider the prevention side of things and deal with the long-term causes, as other hon. Members have said.

One such long-term problem is bereavement, which relates to the adverse childhood experiences issues to which other Members have referred. It will of course be only one of the issues, but we do not properly treat traumatised bereaved children at all in this country. I am not necessarily talking about children who may be traumatised because one of their loved-ones has been murdered; I am talking about children whose parent may have died naturally. We are hopeless as a society at dealing with that. I have been working with the “Life Matters” taskforce, which is not considering the issue from the angle that we are looking at it today, but I want to bring it in because it offers an example of how rubbish we have been at dealing with some of the adverse childhood experience issues.

We do not measure the number of children who have lost their mother or father, because we do not record that information. I have met the Office for National Statistics to talk about that, and the reason is that when a death is registered it is recorded if there is a partner, but not if there are any surviving children. There is no requirement in law, but this is a Home Office responsibility, so I will write to the Minister about that and I am having a second meeting with the ONS. If we measure something, surprisingly enough the officials say, “Oh. That’s a problem.” We can then share the problem out and say, “We’re not giving enough help in schools. We’re not giving enough counselling.” The system can suddenly kick into gear, but it does not do that at the moment because we do not realise that there is this massive problem. Let us start thinking at that level about how we can get attention on to such issues.

Another example—perhaps not so weird and wacky—is the local initiatives that are set up when someone loses a dear one. We have seen lots of charitable initiatives to tackle knife crime. We all know about Redthread, but a Christian youth charity in my constituency called Oxygen has set up an amazing programme—before the Minister reminds me, the Home Office helped to fund it—called “What’s the Point?” whereby the group goes into schools, bringing along people whose loved ones have been the victim of knife murders. There is also a new initiative in my constituency called “Drop a Knife, Save a Life” that was set up by an amazing woman called Sophie Kafeero, whose son, Derick Mulondo was murdered in my constituency 18 months ago. Sophie came to this country from Uganda about three decades ago, and she was a leading community activist on HIV/AIDS in the African population. She is an amazing lady, but she lost her only child in the later years of her life. She is full of grief when you talk to her, but she tells her story and goes into schools to talk to young people.

Interestingly, Sophie has noted in her work in the community that it is the really simple stuff that matters—just like the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle was talking about when describing his time as a youth worker all those years ago—such as organising some football. Sophie tells a story about how a young boy knocked on her door after her son Derick had died and said, “Who’s going to help us play football now?” Derick had arranged football games among the young people in the local community, but he was killed with a knife. If we can find those sorts of initiatives, we can get on top of this problem, but we have to give it the seriousness that it deserves. Such solutions are not rocket science, but they are vital.

I hope that the Minister will not take my final point as my bringing in a little controversy, but police resources are vital, and we are particularly missing the police
community support officers. When we had a sergeant, two PCSs and three PCSOs in every ward in my constituency, the police knew what they were doing. We had days when wards had no crime reported at all, which has hardly happened since. People felt more confident and safer, and the community felt happier. Trying to measure that may be difficult, but that sort of thing is what I would call a public health model. This is about taking things in a different way and getting to the root of the problem. This is about giving our young people the support and the role models that they need.

3.54 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I will start with what motivated me to speak in this debate. I was first elected in 2015, and in September of that year I had to deal with losing two young men in my constituency. I saw the impact it had on the whole community. Since then we have lost 10 young people in Lewisham, Deptford. With 130 lost in London and 263 lost across the country this year alone, this clearly is not something we can simply tackle in Lewisham, Deptford alone.

If that many people had died in a football stadium, a music arena or a workplace, we would be having a national inquiry. From my conversations with experts and young people, I quickly realised that anything we do needs to be cross-party—we cannot play politics with young people’s lives—and evidence-led. That is why we established the cross-party commission on the root causes of youth violence. Warwick University joined as our academic partner, and academics from elsewhere, including the Open University, have supported our work. A public health approach was the key recommendation of our interim report.

In talking about a public health approach, people far too often, and particularly politicians and commentators, say the words but do not understand what they mean or where they come from. In 1996, at its 49th annual conference, the World Health Organisation declared violence “a major and growing public health concern around the world” and in 2002 it advocated tackling violence as a public health problem. The World Health Organisation identified that violence acts and spreads like a disease.

The focus is on dealing with violence just like any other disease. The World Health Organisation’s evidence shows that violence spreads like a disease and, as such, we need to treat the disease and prevent it from spreading. Across the world, from Chicago to Scotland, there are numerous examples of successful public health programmes aimed at tackling violence. I could name loads of them, but I have had to cut down my speech dramatically to stay within the time limit.

Cure Violence, founded in Chicago in 2000 under the name CeaseFire, runs projects all over the world, including in England at Cookham Wood young offender institution. The project at Cookham Wood resulted in a 50% reduction in violent incidents, a 95% reduction in group attacks and a 96% reduction in youths involved in group violence.

Cure Violence maintains that violence is a learned behaviour that can be prevented using disease control methods. The Cure Violence model has five required components, three core components and two implementing components. Put briefly, the model involves, first, detecting potentially violent events and interrupting them to prevent violence through trained, credible messengers; secondly, providing ongoing behaviour change and support to the highest-risk individuals through trained, credible messengers; thirdly, changing community norms that allow, encourage and exacerbate violence in chronically violent neighbourhoods to healthy norms that reject the use of violence; fourthly, continually analysing data to ensure proper implementation and to identify changes in violence patterns and levels; and fifthly, providing training and technical assistance to workers, programme members and implementing agencies.

In Scotland, the violence reduction unit established in 2005 has reduced the number of homicides by 39% and the number of violent crimes by 69%, which is huge. I could talk for hours about the unit’s work, but I will not. I will simply say that I have nothing other than total respect for the unit’s work and for the magnificent people I have met.

Karyn McCluskey and John Carnochan, who set up the unit, are two of the finest, most dedicated people I have ever met. It has never been just a job to them. They drafted the violence reduction unit’s first plan and they would say that they had lots of dedicated people who worked with them, and I know that to be true. What would be the main things they would say to me if they were here? They would say, “It is about understanding that to mean breaking down barriers, pulling people together on a common aim and enthusing people to do something that is going to work. It is also about the importance of individual relationships. They would also say, “Follow the evidence. Don’t do things that don’t work. Do things that work.” That might sometimes mean trying something, realising it is not working and binning it, and then trying something else that will work. They would also say, “Listen. Listen to what you’re being told and what the evidence shows you. Listen to our young people and recognise they are so, so often so very vulnerable, even if they put a super-hard act on.” One of the most important things they would say is that our approach must be long term. They had a 10-year strategy, but when we speak to them, they say it could and probably should have been 15 or 20 years long.

I am glad to see that Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, has announced the establishment of a violence reduction unit in London, which will establish a public health approach to reducing violence, learning the lessons from Scotland, but appreciating we may need some different approaches in London. Local authorities need to have the legal duty—this is not just about having a consultation on a legal duty—to underpin a public health approach in tackling violent crime. I hope the Home Office can update us on that soon.

Turning back to what the Government can do, we need to learn lessons from what works. We need to be brave and follow the evidence, which can be difficult when the Government do not store data on crucial sources of information. Can the Minister tell me why the Government do not centrally hold data on the time of knife attacks, especially as recent research has shown that young people are especially vulnerable between 4 pm and 6 pm on school days? Data on the number of knife aggravated murders in each city or local authority is also not held centrally, which makes it far harder to compare the efficacy of different local authority approaches over time. The number of prisoners that were excluded from school is also not regularly recorded. Many victims of knife crime do not report their injuries to the police, so should we not be looking for this information in
other areas, such as the NHS? The Government do not cross-reference ambulance service dispatch data for knife injuries and police records for knife attacks. Many people believe there is a link between deprivation and levels of violence, so why do the Government not hold this information? Finally, but extremely importantly, why do we not record the number of young people who applied but failed to meet the threshold for child and adolescent mental health services treatment?

Those are all extremely important areas—and I am sure there are many more—where we should hold data, as a minimum to ensure that the Government can successfully deliver on their public health approach. I have asked numerous questions of the Government and others in order to try to find this information, but, sadly, I know the Government do not hold this data. Why is that? Will the Government commit today to seeking to hold this data?

Why do we invest in programmes that we know do not work? For example, there is no evidence to suggest that programmes in schools that say, “Do not use drugs” or, “Do not carry a knife” have any impact. We should analyse the efficacy of these programmes and if they do not work, we must stop them. We know that programmes investing in social development, home visitation, training in parenting, mentoring programmes and family therapy work. We also know that the earlier the intervention, the more effective it is.

I will skip through what I have on adverse childhood experiences, because I know that other Members have gone through it, but ACEs is an extremely important area of work and we need to do a lot more on it. I encourage all Members of Parliament to do the survey on ACEs and get their scores, as I intend to do in the future. I understand that the Government are due to publish a report on ACEs; when will it be published?

I will skip through my comments on schools, but in previous speeches on education I have said a lot about what happens in schools. It is really important that we look into whether school finishing times are right and whether we should stagger them. Should we think about what happens in schools. It is really important that we look into whether school finishing times are right and whether we should stagger them. Should we think about looking into whether school finishing times are right and whether we should stagger them. Should we think about what happens in schools.

Let me conclude my remarks with an important quote from a Member of the Youth Parliament, Ciya Vyas, who spoke about the importance of tackling knife crime in the recent UK Youth Parliament debate on the subject. She said:

“More young people voted for this issue than any other...If there is a will for change on this issue among young people, there is a political will for change here at Westminster. Whether we see the need for a violence reduction unit and a public health approach, as pioneered so successfully in Scotland and endorsed here by London’s Mayor, or the Home Secretary’s recent proposals to increase levels of stop-and-search, this debate is happening now, and we cannot neglect our duty to bring young people’s voices into it.”

After that debate, and following a ballot of more than 1 million young people throughout the nation, the Youth Parliament and the British Youth Council chose knife crime as the subject of their national campaign. Let us make sure that as politicians we do not let them down.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I know this will be unpopular, but in order that everybody can speak, I am going to have to drop the informal time limit down to six minutes—and no more, please. I am sorry, but I have to leave time for the Front-Bench contributions.

4.6 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Let me put on record my awe at the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) has been doing on this issue, along with my hon. Friends the Members for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones). It has been incredibly powerful to watch. In my short contribution I want to read into the record what it is like to be from a community in the grip of this disease, because we know at first hand in Walthamstow. I have felt like I have been living a parallel life over the past couple of years: the debates are about either Brexit or knife crime, but both have powerfully divided my local community.

We are a community who know what it means to lose our loved ones. On 7 May 2017, Elijah Dornelly was stabbed. He was 17 years old. He died. On 20 November, Kacem Mokrane died in hospital after being stabbed four days previously. He was 18. On 14 March, Joseph William-Torres was shot in his car. He was 20 years old. He died. On 2 April this year, Amaan Shakoor, 16 years old, was shot in a school car park in Walthamstow. He died. On 22 September, Guleed Farah, 19 years old, was shot dead on Vallentin Road in Walthamstow.

There are not just the ones we have lost, but the ones who have—thankfully—lived through this trauma. On 14 November last year, an 18-year-old was stabbed in a Subway restaurant in Walthamstow. On 19 November, a 17-year-old was stabbed. On 5 February this year, a 17-year-old turned up at our local hospital with gunshot wounds. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford, pointed out, it is often the hospitals, rather than the police, that know about these problems. On 3 May, two young men were found stabbed in my local high street in Walthamstow. On 27 August this year, a 16-year-old was found stabbed in the neck on Markhouse Road. Mercifully, he survived. On 9 November, a 20-year-old was found with stab wounds in our local leisure centre. On 12 November, a 17-year-old was found stabbed on Hoe Street in Walthamstow. Just this week, on 11 December, a 15-year-old boy was stabbed in a school playground in Walthamstow.

It is fair to say that in the eight years that I have been an MP in Walthamstow we have always had a challenge with gangs in our local community. Professor John Pitts has catalogued that for us in work on what he called reluctant gangsters. Eight years ago, it was about postcodes and the pride that people felt about their local communities—the Beaumont estate, the Boundary Road, the Priory Court, the Drive. Kids wore their membership as a badge of pride to put fear into their rivals. People here have talked about adverse childhood experiences and definitely then that was a factor too, but now we see how it has changed from reluctant gangsters to making profits, as John Pitts points out. It is organised crime that is driving much of this violence. People have mentioned county lines already.

We might have 250 recognised gangs across London. In my local community, we have identified around 230 gang nominals. Indeed, the Mali Boys have come to
devastate our local area and to frighten many. These gangs do not advertise their membership now; it is bad for business, because it is driven by drugs. They use their territories not to deter other people, but as marketing grounds—as places where they find their customers. The most valuable resource for them is the phone, so that they can be on-call to deliver the drugs, and, yes, children are sent all around the country to deal, to as far away as Scotland, but also to Essex, to Norfolk and the Thames Valley.

The public health model reflects that, over the past eight years, the same factors are at stake: the childhood chaos, the poverty and the resources that we need to address these problems. For my local community, living in the grip of this disease of youth violence, the same fears remain. There are the parents who tell me that they do not want their kids to get on the buses to go to school because they do not know what will happen to them. There is the shock when they see the police tape and, yes, the social media posts when somebody has spotted something. There is the fear of the gang knives and the guns that we now have on our streets. There are little boys who are dying— they are boys, they are teenagers—and the girls who are taught up in sexual exploitation. There is the domestic violence that is behind much of this, and the frustrations of my local social workers who do an amazing job for Waltham Forest Council, trying to work with these families. There are the people who work through Christmas trying to keep our kids alive.

We cannot pretend that resources do not matter in these circumstances. We cannot pretend that, when finally we get those resources, it does not make a difference. This October, 30 members of the Mali gang were arrested. We have seen in just one area of Walthamstow, in St James’s Street, 15 arrests in one month alone, because we are seeing guns, knives and drugs being taken off our streets. We have had a 24% increase in offensive weapon offences in Walthamstow in the past year alone, so, of course, enforcement and policing make a difference. Anybody who says otherwise simply does not understand what it is like to live within this community, and we know that that is not enough.

Finally, let me pay tribute to all the other organisations that are working with our council: Spark2Life, Access Aspiration, Soul Project, Gangs United, Boxing for Life, Camara at Words 4 Weapons, Slunky, and Waltham Forest community hub and Monwara Ali. Our community will not stand by while this happens. Minister, please, give us the resources for the youth services that we need to help our young people. Give us the police that we need to work with them, because this disease is gripping us and it is frightening.

4.12 pm

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): I wholeheartedly agree with the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). I just want to recount to the House, by way of example, just what has been happening in our borough of Lambeth recently.

On 25 July, two boys on a moped pull up next to a parked car in Denmark Road, in another part of the borough from my constituency, but near to one of our local hospitals, King’s College. The moped passenger slides sideways off the seat and falls on to the road. The driver shouts to those nearby, “Help him! Help him! He’s been stabbed.” Two men in a parked car jump out to help and the moped driver just speeds off. The boy lies in the road, bleeding. He dies a few hours later. His name was Laatwan Griffiths and he was 18 years old. He also went by the name of Splash Addict and SA Harlem, and was part of the Harlem Spartans drill group based in and around the Kennington Park Estate.

A week later, on 1 August, Sidique Kamara, 23, and a member of Moscow17, is stabbed to death yards from his home on an estate in Camberwell. That estate is Moscow17’s base. Laatwan and Sidique were reportedly good friends; Moscow17 and Harlem Spartans are allies. A year earlier Sidique and another member of Moscow17 had been cleared of the murder of Abdurahman Mohamed, who belonged to a rival drill group—I will come to drill in moment—called Zone 2. Zone 2 are at war with Harlem Spartans and Moscow17, and at the end of August there was another incident in the same area, involving up to 20 young boys fighting with knives. Several were stabbed, one horrifically so—a constituent of mine. And so it goes on. We lost young John Ogunjobi in the Pulse Hill part of my constituency last month. That incident was unrelated to the feud I have just mentioned, but did involve other groups. That is what is happening.

Let us be absolutely clear that this is not just an issue of black boys killing other black boys in socially deprived neighbourhoods. It affects all families. Any parent of a teenager in London now worries when they leave their home. Let us also be clear that the demand for illegal drugs from well-off, middle-class people is a major driver of this violence. This is all interconnected. Young people from my area are trafficking drugs around other parts of the country. I say to people who indulge in their cocaine usage and what have you over the weekends: when you snort that line of coke, a whole heap of violence, abuse, exploitation and general criminality has led to that powder going up your nose. You are part of this too. That is why this entire thing needs to be a national mission—an issue that we seek to tackle as a country.

Now, why is it happening? I believe in reciprocity; it is at the heart of my politics. We provide our young people with an environment in which they can thrive, and pursue their hopes, dreams and opportunities. In return, we ask that they abide by the norms, values and rules of the society of which they are a part. The bottom line is that we have broken that social contract with our young people, and unless we address it we are not going to deal with this problem.

We will not be able to reduce the bloodshed unless we go to the root causes, and we have to look at three or four different things. First, as I have said, we dispossession our young people by bringing them up in this environment. In so many parts of my constituency, richness and extreme deprivation sit side by side. In the deprived areas of my community there is a concentration of social problems all sitting in one place. Parents are absolutely struggling and are under intense pressure, often holding down two or three jobs just to make ends meet. I will just quote a young mother from the Pulse Hill estate, who said that “if you want to support our kids, we need support too because it’s a daily struggle.” So we need to sort out the environment.

Secondly, we have to talk about respect and the way it plays into this culture of violence. The friendship groups that young people are part of are surrogate families, but they are families without parental authority and without...
Tackling youth violence therefore requires a public health approach, which means addressing the environments that make people vulnerable to the risk of crime. We have talked about the example of Glasgow, where the violence reduction unit teamed up with agencies in the fields of health, education and social work, and the police force became the first in the world to adopt a public health approach. As a result, recorded crime in Scotland is now at a 40-year low. There are lessons to be learned from that, but it will work only if we join up health, education, youth services, housing, the Home Office and the justice system. Yet all those departments have been cut as part of the Government’s austerity agenda.

For example, the Government spend less than 1% of the NHS budget on children’s mental health, with many children waiting many months for treatment and often being turned away for not meeting the threshold. In the case of education, schools in my constituency tell me that they can identify children who are vulnerable from as young as three years old, because they may have older siblings or other family members in gangs. That is the point at which intervention is really needed, but schools can barely afford to go on as they are, so intervening to carry out that sort of work becomes increasingly difficult. Similarly, we have seen Sure Start centres have their budgets cut, and the loss of things like youth clubs and youth projects across the country.

The Minister mentioned St Giles Trust in her opening remarks, and I pay tribute to it for the work that it does. It was running a fantastic county lines pilot project down in Kent for six months, but then the funding from the Home Office dried up. That is the reality of the situation that we are working in. These projects need funding in order to carry on doing their work. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) for the work that she has done on the Youth Violence Commission—she has campaigned on this issue tirelessly—and also to the Mayor of London, who, despite restricted budgets, has launched the youth violence reduction unit. Such agencies desperately need money so that they can carry out this vital work.

We cannot bring back those we have already lost, but we can take action to prevent more from losing their lives. We can help prevent our vulnerable young people
from turning to crime, and we can offer them aspiration and a stake in our society. What is needed is the funding and the political will.

4.24 pm

Sarah Jones (Croydon Central) (Lab): I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) on the work she has done on the Youth Violence Commission and on securing this debate against all the odds. I do not know whether she asked for the debate nine, 10 or 11 times—

Vicky Foxcroft: Thirteen.

Sarah Jones: Thirteen! She was incredibly persistent.

Lyn Brown: And resilient.

Sarah Jones: Indeed.

Violence is not inevitable—we have to hold on to that. Just as it goes up, so it can come down, if we do the right things, and that is fundamentally what we are here to debate. I had the honour of going to Clarence House yesterday, where Prince Charles was holding an event with Prince Harry. Prince Charles, who takes a great interest in this issue, stood up and said, “Enough is enough. We have to do more to tackle this.” If the royal family are telling us we need to do more, we should pay attention.

We know that we have reached the highest level of knife crime on record and have seen more violent deaths in London than in any year since 2008. This is not a Croydon issue or a London issue; this is a national crisis. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford said, last month a poll of 1 million young people found that knife crime was their No. 1 issue. This must start from the very top, and I would like to see the Prime Minister make a speech on violence. That would set an agenda that the rest of us could follow and would be a powerful way to show that she cares.

Last Friday, some of us from the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime went up to Scotland, where we visited young offenders prison and the violence reduction unit. After leaving the prison, we met a young man called Callum, and for me he epitomises what the public health approach can do. He was born into a family where domestic violence was rife and there was alcoholism. He had a traumatised childhood. He said that he used to spend his time in school looking out of the window, worrying whether his mother was safe at home. He looked at the gangs on the streets and thought that they were a place of safety for him.

Callum ended up getting involved with boys who were much older and in all kinds of criminal activity, which escalated, so he was in and out of prison. He took to drinking and became an alcoholic because he felt such self-loathing and fear. He got himself into a position where one day he was stabbed seven times outside his own house by some men. He looked up and saw his seven-year-old son at the window, seeing his father being stabbed. He was rushed to hospital, where he met a youth worker who said, “Callum, are you done?” and he said, “Yes, I’m done, but I need help.” That was the point at which interventions began. He had therapy, training and a whole raft of interventions that helped him get a job.

His former partner sadly killed herself earlier this year, and Callum now has sole custody of their boy. If he had not turned himself around, that cycle—the epidemic and disease that we all talk about—would have carried on. As his parents, so him, and so his child. Now his child has a chance of a life. That is what we are talking about today.

I will not go through all the different interventions, because we do not have time, but I want to echo the points made about early intervention and prevention. In the young offenders prison that our APPG went to, a third of the prisoners had been in care as a child, 38% had experience of domestic violence and 75% had suffered a traumatic bereavement—for example, a suicide, drug death or murder. That figure is huge, and we do not talk enough about that misunderstood area. Two thirds of the boys in that prison had suffered four or more bereavements, three quarters had witnessed serious violence in their area and 76% had been threatened with a weapon. These young people are traumatised by adverse childhood experiences that have developed through their lives. It is clear that intervention at an early stage, as well as when they get to such as stage, is crucial. Our ambition must be to make this country the safest country in the world for our young people. Nothing less will do.

4.30 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am very grateful, because of my sore throat, that the time limit has been reduced. When I heard it was originally nine minutes, I was going to encourage interventions.

I am a member of the Youth Violence Commission, alongside the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I want to spend my allotted time making it clear that the recommendations in its report are very much evidence-based, and in particular are based on the evidence of the work we saw in Glasgow and in Scotland. When we launched the Youth Violence Commission, I said that one of the first things we need to tackle as a society is the cycle of low expectation in young people—I think we need to raise young people’s hopes—and also that youth violence is a preventable public health problem, but it does require resources and constant commitment.

That was seen when Swayed, a youth organisation that does street outreach work in my constituency, visited the London Assembly. Young people and youth workers met in London to discuss the work that is done both in London and in Glasgow, and I know that both organisations found that very beneficial.

Vicky Foxcroft: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris Stephens: I will give way to save my throat.

Vicky Foxcroft: I just want to point out for the record that my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) is also on the Youth Violence Commission. I had forgotten the name of his seat when I was making my speech.

Chris Stephens: So noted—and it has been good to work with the hon. Gentleman.

On the Youth Violence Commission’s visit in October last year, we went to a school. In my intervention on the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), I mentioned the visits to schools that are made to give young people the skills to deal with challenging, threatening and abusive behaviour.
We visited an after-school club, which at that time was run by Sergeant Danny Stuart. We made an evening visit to Govan to see Johnny Hendry of YouthLink Scotland, a street outreach worker. He provided the commission with insights and a tour of some of the areas he goes to in Govan to engage with and support young people. Points were made earlier about gangs taking over, as well as about drug dealers and all the rest of it. Johnny tells me that what is happening in Scotland is that the violence reduction unit is dealing with the schools, but the drug dealers are after the ones playing truant.

We also visited another organisation in my constituency that has been praised in Parliament, the South West Arts and Music Project, to see its magnificent work. I am a great believer in providing young people with a creative outlet, such as video making or music. Young people can do so much to help the creative industries in our country, and it helps them with their health as well. I think that is one of the keys going forward.

The public health model adopted in Scotland has demonstrated that violence has significant social, structural and environmental root causes that need to be tackled. If a young person is subjected to harsh physical punishment or has seen physical punishment in the household, they are more likely, as others have said, to engage in violence. If we are to support the public health model across these islands, we need to have consistent funding; to provide opportunities, whether educational, recreational or economic; to promote social inclusion; and to enhance social cohesion between parents, young parents and communities. I will be doing all I can while I am a Member of Parliament to make sure that we tackle youth violence across these islands.

4.34 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): Over the past 18 months I have sat in the living rooms of grieving parents who have lost a precious child to knife crime, and in community centres with angry and bewildered local residents who are terrified by the violence they have witnessed. I have faced questions on too many occasions, in school assemblies and youth clubs, from frightened children who ask what is being done to stop knife and gun crime in our area.

Today I am speaking for the bereaved families of Jude Gayle, Kyall Parnell, and John Ogunjobi. Jude Gayle was killed last year as he popped out to the local shop to buy ingredients for a family meal. Kyall Parnell was stabbed at a bus stop in West Norwood on New Year’s Eve, and John Ogunjobi was stabbed just a few weeks ago on the Tulse Hill estate, in front of his mother who had come to pick him up to try to keep him safe.

Lambeth and Southwark, the boroughs that each serve part of my constituency, have among the highest rates of knife crime in London, and among the highest volume of serious violence against young people. That level of challenge has resulted in some truly exceptional work on this issue, and I pay tribute to the organisations that work hard every day to keep young people safe, to save the lives of those who are injured, and to intervene to turn lives around.

The work of the trauma team in King’s College hospital under Duncan Bew, Malcolm Tunnicliff and Emer Sutherland is second to none. They have developed life saving techniques for gun and knife-related injuries, and they also work with the charity Redthread, under the leadership of John Poyton, on an intervention approach for young people who come to the emergency department.

There are many inspirational community organisations, such as the Dwyamnics boxing gym, which was established by Lorraine Jones who lost her son, Dwayne Simpson, to knife crime in 2014. There is the work of Lee Dema and the St Matthew’s project, which provides football coaching for young people in Brockwell Park, and the Marcus Lipton youth centre led by Ira Campbell. Brixton Wings is based on the Angell Town Estate, and the Advocacy Academy empowers young people to speak truth to power on the issues that matter to them, and to work for change in their area.

The DIVERT team led by Inspector Jack Rowlands at Brixton police station—now also in Hackney, Tower Hamlets, Croydon and Lewisham—provides intensive support and intervention for young adults in police custody. It is hugely innovative and successful, and I am glad the Government recently recognised that by agreeing to extend funding for the existing programme for a further two years. Nevertheless, more commitment is needed. DIVERT should be the norm in every police station and every community where youth violence is a serious issue, and it should be funded as a part of mainstream policing. Both Lambeth and Southwark have sought to protect funding for youth services at a time when they have lost more than half their funding from central Government. Why, when there is so much good work to celebrate, is violence that affects young people continuing to increase?

The number of school exclusions has been rising in recent years, with particularly alarming increases among children eligible for free school meals and those with special educational needs, who account for almost half of exclusions. Currently, when a school excludes a child, the school’s responsibility for that child comes to an end. Since the number of academies is increasing under this Government, and academies have their own admissions authorities, in many areas it is becoming increasingly difficult for local authorities to find places for excluded children. A child who has been excluded needs more intervention, not less, and children who end up out of school for extended periods following exclusion are surely at greater risk of becoming involved in violence, both as victims and perpetrators. More must be done to fund our schools to provide intervention and support for students whose behaviour is challenging, and to hold them to account for the outcomes for every child who has been on their roll.

There is a huge and growing gap in the funding of children’s social services, estimated by the Local Government Association—I declare my interest as a vice-president of the LGA—at around £3 billion. As a consequence, children’s social services departments are stretched to breaking point. They struggle to provide their statutory safeguarding services, and find it increasingly hard to recruit and retain social workers in an environment that is often high risk. Any department under such pressure will find it hard to do the proactive, preventive, early-intervention work that can prevent adverse childhood experiences and reduce the risk of violence later in childhood.

Our youth justice system is woefully under resourced. Government rhetoric on tough sentencing may play well in communities where young people do not regularly
lose their lives to guns and knives, but the reality is a court system on its knees, which allows—this happened in my constituency recently—a young person bailed in north London to travel to south London to rob school children at knife point the next day. Our penal system delivers the scandalously high youth reoffending rate of 41.7%. Such a system must reform as well as punish, which is even more urgently the case for young offenders than for the rest of the prison population. Youth justice must be funded and resourced to do the intensive, transformative work that is needed to stop young offenders returning to a life of violence. That is the right thing for victims as well as perpetrators and our communities more widely, and the current situation is shameful.

Access to mental health support, particularly for children and young people, remains far too difficult within early intervention and crisis services. The extent to which young people who are both the victims and perpetrators of violent crime are clinically traumatised is documented and evidenced, but still not reflected in mainstream practice in mental health services.

My final observation on this issue is the extent of the issues at local level which never register with any public services. I reflect on the conversations I have had recently with parents in my constituency. One mother told me about the number of young people with minor knife injuries who she has patched up in her kitchen because they are too scared to go to hospital, and how some of them have then become too scared to leave their own homes. She came to see me because she was struggling to support another mother whose child had been traumatised by the violence he had experienced and spent his days smashing up his mother’s home. Another mother told me how she will not let her 16-year-old pop out to the shop on her estate because:

“I don’t know which gang is going to be there and whether he will come back.”

The public health approach to youth violence has to mean more than words. The measure of the Government’s commitment to the public health approach in my constituency will be whether it relieves the anxiety of those mothers who are fearful every time their teenagers leave the house and whether it stops the killing. Next week, when I see the family of John Ogunjobi who was left the house and whether it stops the killing. Next week, when I see the family of John Ogunjobi who was recently stabbed to death, I want to be able to look them in the eye and say that that is this is going to stop and that other families will not have to suffer their agony. Under this Government, I do not believe I can do so.

4.40 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for bringing this debate to the Floor of the House. The magnificent contributions from right hon. and hon. Members have been truly something to acknowledge.

The issue of youth violence has moved on massively from my day. There may not be many people of my day in the Chamber—perhaps with the exception of yourself, Mr Deputy Speaker, or thereabouts—but in those far off days a “fair dig” was the worst it ever got after school and then it was all over. Things have changed, however. I was horrified to read back in March that more than 1,000 children in Northern Ireland have received criminal convictions in the past five years. The youngest criminals convicted in that period were just 12 years of age. It costs £324,000 per year to keep a young person in custody and the Northern Ireland young offender population is proportionately larger than that of England and Wales. In total, 1,085 children under the age of 18 carried out one or more crimes in the past five years. Among that number are five 12-year-olds, the youngest of whom was convicted of criminal damage. There were 279 convictions in 2015 and 207 in 2017.

In the very short time I have, I would like to give two examples of solutions—this is about solutions as well as statistics. In my constituency, I am very fortunate to have an organisation called Street Pastors, which is a coming together of churches. Other Members may have something similar in their constituencies. It is clear that it is not simply youth violence that is the culprit in these convictions. It is also clear that this is something that must be addressed. Having seen a massive reduction in antisocial behaviour in my area with the work of Street Pastors, who have managed to make friendships, build trust and prevent cross words turning to street brawls, it is clear that the voluntary sector is an essential tool in tackling youth violence. Street Pastors has a good interaction with young people. Antisocial issues that led to violence have dissipated. I have seen its good work, which has been made possible by churches coming together.

The work carried out by community groups, churches and voluntary groups is incredible and brings dividends, but there is greater work to be carried out in other realms. I agree with the comments made by Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge with regard to social media outlets living up to their responsibility and not simply doing the bare minimum expected of them. There must be an end to cyber-bullying, which then translates to physical violence. There must be a clear campaign that weapons and criminal activity is something to be ashamed of, not something to be proud of.

Across Northern Ireland, there has been a very successful advertising campaign that raises such awareness. It states the fact that paramilitaries do not protect, they harm. The adverts are, to say the least, chilling. The screams of a young lad, lying on the floor crying for his mother after being shot in the knees, are difficult to listen to. Paramilitaries and gangs act as judge, jury and executioner, discharging their own cruel, horrific and violent surgical justice. The adverts were commissioned by the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland and they are being used on Snapchat and on other social media. I know how effective they are because of the conversations they have started with my staff and across my community. I know how harsh the adverts are, but the fact is that youth violence is harsh. It leaves long-lasting legacies. It is not a matter of being loyal and standing up for your friends, crew or gang; it is illegal behaviour that has the potential to ruin your life, harm others and bring immeasurable grief to families. The decision to run this type of hard-hitting campaign, which bids to end so-called paramilitary-style attacks, was not taken lightly, but I believe that it gets the right message across.

In conclusion—I am conscious of the time, Mr Deputy Speaker—it is my belief that we can do better on addressing youth violence and it is my fervent hope that we can do better, not simply for the victims, which is not enough, but for all those who are caught up in it, taking things too far and being led further than they want to go. We cannot afford to lose a generation to gang mentality and rage. We must fund community
groups and work alongside churches and other voluntary sectors to work with our young people and change mentalities. We must work with parents and give them the help and support needed to deal with troublesome teens and enable teachers to have choices in their school budget to address the differing needs of pupils. There is work to be done, and we must be determined to do it.

4.45 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Let me say how much we welcome today’s debate. I know that it has felt like a Backbench Business Committee debate, but it was brought forward by the Government after my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) harassed them into doing so. However, I agree with the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who said that it could perhaps have been brought forward with a bit more urgency.

There is not time to list everyone’s contributions, but we have heard some incredibly passionate speeches. We have heard about the devastating consequences of cuts and the breach of the social contract with our young people, which my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) spoke about so powerfully. We have heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), for Streatham, for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) and for Lewisham West and Penge (Ellie Reeves), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher)—we were grateful to her for bringing a non-London-centric point of view to the debate, because this is a national crisis.

We heard about the importance of preventive measures from the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), and for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). We also heard about the powerful lessons from Glasgow from the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) and the spokesperson for the SNP, the hon. Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald).

I want to dwell on just two Members’ contributions. The right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton spoke about bereavement. I was on the trip to the violence reduction unit last week and to Polmont young offenders institution. The two greatest commonalities, as my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) mentioned, were school exclusions and traumatic bereavements. Clearly, we need a fast-tracked pathway to trauma counselling for any young person who has experienced trauma, as that is a serious factor in becoming a victim of or committing youth violence.

It is impossible for me to do justice to the incredible work that my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford has done as chair of the Youth Violence Commission. She gave us a full history of the public health debate and the need to treat violence as a disease—but a disease that can be cured—and she outlined the fundamental principles that need to be at the heart of the public health approach. She laid a challenge to the Government to ensure that our interventions are effective and evidence-based, and not simply knee-jerk reactions to congratulate ourselves on having taken action.

We have heard from Members about the devastating consequences of youth violence in their constituencies, but this is a national crisis, too. No society can keep its cohesion or its humanity—indeed, no society can claim to be one at all if it becomes complacent about young people dying on our streets. This is not a spike or a blip as we saw in 2008; it is a trend enveloping a generation of young people, and it requires immediate national action directed by Government. It must be directed from the very top as part of a national mission.

The Home Secretary highlighted the importance of early intervention in tackling violence when he told “The Andrew Marr Show” that we must deal with the “root causes” of violence. The £20 million a year to be spent on early intervention and prevention has to be seen in the context of the £387 million cut from youth services, the £1 billion taken from children’s services and the £2.7 billion taken from school budgets since 2015. As the Children’s Commissioner said in her excellent report on vulnerabilities:

“We are all familiar with frailty in old age but much less so for children and teenagers… do we know the same about children who start school unable to speak?… Do we understand how this affects their further progression? Do we realise that an inability to express yourself leads to anger, and difficult behaviour, which is then reflected in rising school exclusions… Do we know that if this continues… not only does the child’s education suffer but so does their mental health? Do we know that 60% of children who end up in the youth justice estate have a communication problem, most of which could have been effectively treated?”

We talk about hard-to-reach young people all the time in this place, but I would suggest that it is our services that are hard to reach and that we set young people up to fail.

The truth is that the public health model can work only with intensive support and investment in our most vulnerable young people, driven by a co-ordinated effect across government. This is not just about statutory agencies—the vision and duty must sit across a huge range of community services, and voluntary sector and faith organisations. I am concerned that the Government’s approach might be too restrictive and overly focused on statutory agencies. It is not clear how the new duty that the Minister has announced will go beyond the duty already placed on those agencies by the Crime and Disorder Act 1998.

The public health approach requires a strong criminal justice response. For that, we need police on our streets and in our communities. It requires a fundamental shift towards prevention and early intervention. Nothing that Glasgow and other public health models have achieved is rocket science. Very little of it requires legislation. However, it does require a clear mission statement, political will and leadership. It requires us to recognise that relationships must be at the heart of protecting and keeping our young people safe; and that human interventions from stable, trusted adults are the saviour of every young man or woman who has turned their life around. It requires young people’s voices to be at the heart of the design of those interventions, and it requires all our services to be trauma informed.

The challenge facing the country from violent crime is truly frightening and at times can feel overwhelming, but with the right resources, the right approach and the political leadership from the House and in every community in our country, it is possible to stem the tide.
Victoria Atkins: With the leave of the House, I will wind up the debate. I thank colleagues on both sides of the House for their contributions to this important debate. We have heard, as I suspected we would, many sad instances. I thank colleagues who have shared the terribly sad stories from their constituencies in the Chamber.

I thank the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who called for the debate. I gave her a hint that it might be worth her while to ask for it in business questions last week. I am pleased that she did so because my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House was able to announce it. I also thank her for her work, along with the hon. Members for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) and for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and other colleagues, for their work on the Youth Violence Commission, which has certainly helped to inform our debate as well as our wider work on this important topic. The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford asked a number of detailed and important questions. I hope she will understand that I will write to her to answer them. In fact, I will go further than that and invite her to the Home Office to discuss the issues she has raised, because they are important and worth considering very carefully.

As we have heard, this violence is having an appalling impact on families and communities. It is clear that tackling violent crime matters to and affects hon. Members on both sides of the House, which is why we must continue to work together to tackle it. I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), for saying that we cannot arrest our way out of this. I completely agree with her and, in fairness, have been saying that for many months. I very much hope that the approach we are taking—the serious violence strategy and the public health duty—shows that we get that and are not just focusing on law enforcement, important though that can be in some respects.

I must always mention the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) when we have a debate on this. She made the point about grooming—the shadow Home Secretary talked about focusing on young people, which we tend to do because it is so terrible to think of young lives cut short. The older people who run the gangs and groom the young people are absolutely in our sights. That is where law enforcement is important. Through the work of the National Crime Agency and the serious and organised crime strategy, for which extra funding of £90 million has been announced today, we are absolutely determined to reach the leaders of those gangs.

Hon. Members including my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton), the hon. Member for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), mentioned the importance of investment, including longer-term investment, in charities and services that can help to intervene and stop young people being involved in serious violence. That is why I have great expectations of the new £200 million youth endowment fund, which will be delivered over 10 years. We are in the process of setting it up, with a view to more investment. It is protected for 10 years. I can tell the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford that it will, I hope, fund innovative projects. We must accept that that will involve risk, because while I hope that those projects will succeed, they may fail. Sometimes, when ground-breaking work is being done, understanding what does not work helps us to find out what does. I very much hope that the fund will deliver transformative change in the way in which we tackle youth violence.

I have referred to the consultation on a new legal duty to underpin a public health approach. I am pleased that that has met with agreement across the House, because I think that it could help to focus minds, not just nationally but at local level, on the importance of tackling and intervening in serious violence at an earlier stage. We have also announced an independent review of drug misuse, and we are working on the final terms of reference. I hope to be able to make a further announcement shortly.

I thank the hon. Member for Streatham for his very powerful speech, and for his particularly powerful message to middle-class drug users. As he put it so eloquently, when they are snorting cocaine up their noses at the weekend, they need to understand how that coke got into their hands in the first place. I hope that the more we spread the message about the irresponsibility of such drug habits, the greater impact that will have on the young people whom we have talked about today.

There has been, interestingly, a focus on international elements. I am grateful for the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton and, again, to the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford for mentioning the work of the World Health Organisation. We are not alone in seeing increases in serious violence in England and Wales. We know that, for example, the United States, Canada and Sweden have experienced rises in one or more types of serious violence over the last three years.

Last month we held an international symposium, drawing together more than 100 leading international and UK academics, senior police leaders, experts and practitioners to exchange ideas about the causes of those rises, and about best practice in tackling them. I managed to attend only a small part of the symposium, but it was a real pleasure to hear from senior law enforcement officers from Chicago, New York and elsewhere about what they call “precision policing”, and to learn about the international efforts to establish a health agenda as well. It was a very interesting and, for me, worthwhile exercise. We want to continue that international work, because we believe that—particularly in the context of the drug markets—we should not ignore what is happening elsewhere in the world, but should learn lessons from what has worked elsewhere.

Many colleagues raised the issue of exclusions. There is a great piece of work going on at the moment with Edward Timpson looking into alternative education provision. Having spoken to him again, I think that there will be some productive suggestions of ways of ensuring that children in alternative provision do not fall into the traps laid by criminal gangs. As we know, that happens, particularly in the case of county lines. The Department for Education is providing £4 million through its alternative provision innovation fund to improve outcomes for children in non-mainstream education. We continue to work together as Departments on the important task of tackling serious violence.

I was interested to hear what was said by the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton and the hon. Member for Croydon Central (Sarah Jones) about the
impact of grief on children. I look forward to the right hon. Gentleman’s correspondence, because I think that that is an issue on which we should work together. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), who, as I said earlier, made valuable contributions during the debate on the Offensive Weapons Bill. I took on board his points about cupboards, and we are having ongoing discussions with retailers about the voluntary matters.

Many other issues were raised which I regret I do not have time to deal with. Let me again stress our determination to stop serious violence, and also thank the police, emergency workers, hospital staff and everyone else who will be looking after us and our young people over Christmas. Let us end the debate as we began it, with the families who are grieving and the young people themselves very much in our minds and our hearts this Christmas.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered a public health model to reduce youth violence.
It is vital that the Government intervene to ensure that sub-postmasters have a viable business. Post Office Ltd takes responsibility for the post office network on behalf of the Government and it is falling short. This is despite the Government’s £2.4 billion investment in the network since 2012. People expect to get value for money. Overall remuneration to postmasters fell again last year, by £17 million, and is predicted to fall by a further £10 million. The rural post office network is not in a good place yet Post Office Ltd reported profits of £36 million in the year 2017-18.

I have been working with one particular community on the Lizard. The current arrangement, which ensures that the local community has access to post office services in the summer and also in the quieter winter period, cannot be maintained—and nor should it be—but the Post Office has spectacularly failed to find an alternative arrangement that maintains a service for the community and treats the current sub-postmaster, who has given several decades of his life to his community, with respect. In a meeting with the chief executive of Post Office Ltd on 24 April this year, I was assured of her commitment to find a solution, but there has been no further communication on this transaction at the heart of the local and community branches of the Post Office is £10, of which the postmaster will receive only 24p for the transaction. In a larger branch, the figure rises to 37p per £1,000 transaction. For at least one of my former post offices, it was the banking that broke the camel’s back. The postmaster was taking the risk and the responsibility of handling tens of thousands of pounds every week but being paid only a few hundred a year for the privilege. That community no longer has a post office branch.

Another part of the campaign, which has received such support in my constituency, is that the Government and Post Office Ltd must maintain and grow post office services. The Government share some responsibility for the services that are available over a post office counter. As we speak today, the Department for Work and Pensions is writing to people who use their post office account to receive their money to encourage them to switch to a bank account. Those people can still do the services that are available over a post office counter. It has been left to the local community and local Post Office representative—whose responsibilities span the entire Duchy of Cornwall—to find a solution. So, three years on, there is no change.

I have now taken the fight to the Government. In a recent meeting with the Minister for Rural Affairs, I proposed a winter payment plan that recognises that the footfall over the winter is considerably reduced. That plan would help the businesses to be sustained through quieter off-peak periods. This would maintain the service for those who live in the area all year round, and ensure that the service is open when the visitors descend. I also stressed the need for a dedicated mobile service so that post office services can be provided quickly following a post office branch closure. Six of the seven post office closures in west Cornwall have left local residents with no easy access to post office services since their branch has closed. In fact, the one post office that enjoys a mobile service had no service this week because of ill health. Even that post office, which provides temporary services for two hours, two days a week, has not provided those services this week. This is in Newlyn. It has a large community and is the fourth biggest fishing port in the country, yet it has no post office service.

I am grateful that Lord Gardiner and his officials agreed to meet the chief executive of Post Office Ltd to explore these demands. A post office branch must be a viable business for the owner, and I have long argued that Post Office Ltd has no vision or plan for rural post office services. It is now for the Minister to intervene and find a bespoke solution that supports post offices during the winter to maintain an essential service all year round. This is true not only for rural west Cornwall but for about 6,000 sub-post offices around the country.

Also, post office banking must pay. We are all acutely aware of the decline in high street banks. Now that most banking transactions can be made in a post office branch, this offers a real opportunity and a great plus for the post office network. In 2016, when it first became possible for banking services to be provided in post offices, it was a great leap forward and offered real hope and opportunity for many post offices. Post office banking has experienced strong growth of £20 million, as reported in the Post Office’s own financial report this year, but the reality is that only £3 million of that £20 million has filtered through to the postmasters. The industry average charge to a business depositing £1,000 in local and community branches of the Post Office is £10, of which the postmaster will receive only 24p for the transaction. In a larger branch, the figure rises to 37p per £1,000 transaction. For at least one of my former post offices, it was the banking that broke the camel’s back. The postmaster was taking the risk and the responsibility of handling tens of thousands of pounds every week but being paid only a few hundred a year for the privilege. That community no longer has a post office branch.

An added dimension and potential threat to the Post Office network that must be considered is that Royal Mail and the Post Office are different businesses facing different challenges. To maintain the Post Office in public ownership and enable private sector investment in Royal Mail’s letters and parcels business, Post Office Ltd was separated from Royal Mail Group Ltd in April 2012. To ensure the continuation of their existing business relationship, the management of Royal Mail and the Post Office put in place a commercial contract between the two parties at the time of separation with the longest possible contract length permitted by law. That commercial agreement is coming to an end, and negotiations on their future relationship have started. They complement each other well and are natural business partners. In fact, the chief executive of Royal Mail said it would be “unthinkable” that there would not always be a strong relationship between Royal Mail and the Post Office.

However, I understand that Royal Mail has already introduced a service whereby people post items directly through the counter at the sorting office, bypassing the post office, and is trialling a local collect service using a national convenience store rather than the post office network. It would not be right for the Minister to
intervene in a commercial contract, but I plead with her to press the Post Office to ensure that it is doing everything to be competitive and to tender for vital services.

There is no time to waste. Thousands of post offices are at risk. This is an opportunity for the Government to reaffirm their commitment to local businesses and their recognition of the essential and valuable work of the rural post office network. For the sake of rural post offices and the many sub-postmasters both in my constituency and around the country and for all those who value and depend on post office services, my plea to the Minister is to ensure that sub-postmasters have a viable business, to work with the banks to ensure that they pay sub-postmasters a fair price for their services, and to ensure that every Department demonstrates a commitment, where they can, to increase the services available in rural post offices.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) on securing this important debate. He has been a passionate advocate for post office services in his constituency. We have spoken at great length about the post office network and have another meeting booked in for the new year. As he outlined, he has also met Lord Gardiner to discuss this topic. One of the best things about my role is being responsible for postal services—I know how important the post office is to all our communities, not just rural areas, so this is an important part of my responsibilities. For centuries, post offices have been the centre of social life in our communities, towns and villages. That is especially true in rural areas, which is why our 2017 manifesto committed to safeguarding the post office network and supporting rural services.

Between 2010 and 2018, this Government provided nearly £2 billion to maintain and invest in a national network of at least 11,500 post offices. The Post Office currently meets and exceeds all the Government accessibility targets at national level. Government investment has enabled the modernisation of more than 7,500 branches, added more than 200,000 opening hours a week and established the Post Office as the largest network trading on Sunday.

The Post Office’s agreement with the high street banks has enabled personal and business banking in all branches, supporting consumers, businesses and local economies facing bank branch closures, particularly in rural areas. The Post Office’s financial performance has improved significantly and, consequently, the Government funding required to sustain the network has drastically decreased and is set to decrease even further in coming years.

I encourage the House to look objectively at those facts, which clearly show that the network is as stable today as it has been in decades. We must remember that the post office network declined by 38% under the last Labour Government, with more than 7,000 branch closures.

Serving rural communities is at the heart of the Post Office’s social purpose. There are more than 6,100 post offices in rural areas, with nearly all the population in such areas living within three miles of a branch. Last year, Citizens Advice found that seven out of 10 rural consumers buy essential items at post offices and that almost 3 million rural shoppers visit a post office on a weekly basis. That is 31%, compared with 21% of people living in cities. Illustrating how important the post office is to such areas is the fact that almost half of rural post offices have community status. The post office is the last shop in some villages.

Rural branches, whether main branches, local branches or traditional branches, can offer the same products and services as urban branches of the same category. The Post Office recognises the unique challenge of running a community branch and supports such postmasters differently from the rest of the network. They receive fixed remuneration, as well as variable remuneration to reflect their special situation.

In addition, the Post Office delivered almost £10 million of investment via the community fund between 2014 and 2018, which enabled community branches to invest in their associated retail business. The Post Office has now launched a smaller community branch development scheme, which will benefit an anticipated 700 branches. Let me be clear that this Government and Post Office Ltd will continue to support rural post offices.

In rural areas such as the St Ives constituency, when the shop in which the post office is based closes, there may be few other commercial premises from which services can be offered to consumers. In such instances, the Post Office explores how an outreach service run by a nearby postmaster can ensure the continuity of services for the community, such as via a mobile van.

For example, in my hon. Friend’s constituency the St Keverne postmaster will be extending the mobile visit timetable to provide services at—excuse my pronunciations if they are not correct—Heamoor, Gulval, Carbis Bay, Leedstown, Praa Sands and Crowntown over the coming months. Outreach and mobile services are highly valued by the communities they serve, as they offer all the same services as a bricks-and-mortar branch.

**Derek Thomas:** I thank the Minister for listing those places—she was not far off. Does she accept that it was the work that we have been doing as a local community to put pressure on the Post Office, and to bring this issue to the Minister and other Ministers, that finally got the Post Office even to consider that mobile service, which at the moment is not in place? Some of those villages have not had post office services for more than a year.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** I thank my hon. Friend for his point. He is right in what he says and I recognise that I was going to come on to this later, but I will respond directly to his point now. The Government are the sole shareholder in the Post Office. It is right that we work with the Post Office, challenging it where necessary, and with constituency
MPs and the community to make sure that we can deliver the right services for the community. As I always do when speaking about post offices at the Dispatch Box, let me say that we are committed to working with MPs and their communities, and we will continue to do so in order to maintain the branch network we have and to try to serve communities as best we can.

Outreach and mobile services are highly valued by the communities they serve, as they offer all the same services as bricks-and-mortar branches. They have been successful in taking key services such as everyday banking to customers, giving them vital access to cash in areas where there are no bank branches nearby. The Post Office directly contributes towards the costs of those outreach services, in conjunction with the postmaster running them, whose parent branch benefits from the transactional income accrued from the visits to outlying communities.

My hon. Friend raised important points about the specific challenge of running a post office in communities where seasonal trade and variation plays a significant role. I know that the Post Office listens to the community and the postmasters in St Ives by taking a more flexible approach to opening hours requirements across the year. That will allow branches to be more sustainable through the leaner, off-peak seasons, when their post office and associated shop has fewer customers. As he said, the issue was taken up by Lord Gardiner in his meeting with Paula Vennells, the Post Office’s chief executive officer, on 4 December. I understand that there will be a follow-up meeting with her in the constituency in the New Year to discuss this and other matters further. I am confident that this ongoing, frank and sustained engagement is the right way to proceed, so that the issues can be understood and a solution be provided for the benefit of postmasters, businesses and residents of St Ives.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to clarify some misconceptions about the Post Office’s franchising programme, particularly the assumption that franchising means closures and the downgrading of services. Those criticisms are misplaced. Post Office branches are not closing, but are being franchised, either on-site or by relocating to other high street locations. Franchising is nothing new; almost 98% of post offices across the UK are successfully operated by independent businesses and retail partners. Moving the directly managed Crown offices to retail partners has been instrumental in reducing losses in that part of the network.

My hon. Friend raised an important point on postmasters’ remuneration, especially for everyday banking services. As these services have developed and increased, I know the Post Office is looking at ways to better recognise the effort required of its postmasters for banking transactions. In fact, the Post Office has recently notified postmasters that their rates for banking deposits have been increased this year. I understand that the Post Office has now entered negotiations with banks on the next banking service agreement. The Post Office has reassured me that it will do all it can to ensure that postmasters are better remunerated for the vital services that they offer. I should add that the Post Office is picking up vital services in areas that banks have left. It is right that the Post Office does its best to make sure the banks accept the responsibilities involved and the work that post offices are doing on behalf of those communities and, we hope, properly remunerate them.

My hon. Friend also raised an important point about postmasters who cannot exit the business because of the absence of alternative operators to take over their branch. Although that is an operational matter, I assure him that the Post Office is taking it very seriously. As of November 2017, there were more than 450 branches of that type across the network. To help the remaining postmasters, the Post Office has extended the network transformation resignation timeframe to March 2020. That means that all parties can continue to work together to ensure that no communities are left without the invaluable post office services that they rely on. The postmasters affected will continue to receive both fixed and variable remuneration throughout that period. Where solutions are found, the postmasters concerned can leave while still qualifying for their leaver’s compensation.

My hon. Friend raised some particular issues relating to his constituents. I am not aware of some of the detail of those cases, but we are meeting in the new year, so I look forward to discussing those points and seeing how we can move forward.

I reassure my hon. Friend that all post offices across the network, including rural branches, are of the utmost importance to the Government. We recognise their value and importance, and we will continue to honour our manifesto commitments so that post offices can thrive and remain at the heart of our rural and urban communities. I thank my hon. Friend again for making his points, and for his hard work in support of access to post office services for his constituents. I assure him that I will continue to work with him and the Post Office to make sure that the constituents of St Ives receive the post office service that they deserve.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am sure the House would like to wish all postal workers the best for Christmas and the new year, and to thank them for getting the parliamentary mail through.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Monday 17 December 2018

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

Electoral Commissioners

The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported to the House, That the Address of 21 November, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Lord Gilbert of Panteg and Joan Walley as Electoral Commissioners with effect from 1 November 2018 for the period ending on 31 October 2022; and Alastair Ross as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 November 2018 for the period ending on 31 October 2020, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported to the House, That the Address of 12 December, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Richard Lloyd to the office of ordinary member of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for a period of five years with effect from 1 December 2018, was presented to Her Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Children in Care

1. Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): What recent estimate his Department has made of the number of children in the care system. [908209]

Damian Hinds: I understand why my hon. Friend makes that point. It is important that authorities should have flexibility in managing their budgets in line with local priorities, but I also very much agree that early-help services have a really important role to play in promoting the welfare of children and supporting them in achieving better outcomes.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State review the amount of resources put per family to support the birth mother around raising their children? We have had so many cases in York where children have been taken into care or for adoption because of a lack of resources reported by the local authority.

Damian Hinds: We do believe that in most cases it is right for the child to be with their parents and that they should be taken into care only as a last resort. We are putting resources into local authorities to help with that, but money is tight—I totally recognise that—and that is why we are seeking always to improve processes, including by some of our partners in practical innovation programmes.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for appointing a children’s commissioner to Northamptonshire. Why did he feel it necessary to effect such an appointment, and how quickly does he expect results to be realised?

Damian Hinds: Of course, the safety of children must always be paramount, and we consider it to be the right approach, in the circumstances in Northamptonshire, to do that. These things do not all change overnight in terms of systems and processes, but we do expect to see good progress.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Seventy-three per cent. of children’s residential care providers are now run purely for profit. Alongside this, Ofsted has reported a rise in serious enforcement action against providers with regard to safeguarding concerns, poor use of physical restraint, children going missing, and children at high risk of sexual exploitation. How much longer will the right hon. Gentleman preside over the commodification of vulnerable children, and how many children’s residential homes has he visited in his time as Secretary of State?

Damian Hinds: I do not recognise the hon. Lady’s characterisation of what she called commoditisation. A variety of providers are operating in children’s residential placements, and we expect the very highest standards of care for those children. That is why the Ofsted inspections are as they are.

Social Mobility

2. Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility. [908210]

9. Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility. [908217]
17. **Mike Wood** (Dudley South) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility.

22. **Fiona Bruce** (Congleton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve social mobility.

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Social mobility is one of our top priorities, and we have seen the attainment gap for disadvantaged pupils narrow at all levels, from pre-school to university entrance.

**Nigel Huddleston:** My Mid Worcestershire constituency is one of many rural constituencies that received a disappointingly low ranking in the latest social mobility index. The fairer funding formula will help, but what else will the Department do to close the gap in social mobility between rural and urban areas?

**Damian Hinds:** My hon. Friend is right to identify the issue in rural areas. It is encouraging that the number of good or outstanding schools in his constituency is up from 37 to 41 since 2010, but he is correct that rural areas can face distinct barriers. Through the opportunity areas programme, among other things, we will see what else we can learn to assist social mobility in rural areas.

**Scott Mann:** Recent Policy Exchange research shows that poor behaviour is holding back learning and driving teachers out of the profession. Does the Secretary of State agree that if we drive out that poor behaviour, we can give every child a chance to climb the ladder?

**Damian Hinds:** Yes, indeed. Classrooms must be safe, calm and stimulating places for both children and teachers. The Policy Exchange report highlights what the best-performing schools do. We recently pledged £10 million to help share best practice in behaviour management, which we know is so important to teachers.

**Mike Wood:** Is my right hon. Friend aware of the Institute for Fiscal Studies report of 31 October, which shows that since 2010, our reforms have meant more funding going to pupils from poorer backgrounds? If so, will he join me in welcoming that report?

**Damian Hinds:** I welcome the IFS report. We want a country with maximum opportunity for everybody, regardless of their background. The IFS report identifies how reforms since 2010 have increased funding in favour of pupils from poorer backgrounds. That is part of starting to redress the balance and ensure that there are no limits on any child's potential.

**Fiona Bruce:** Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the best ways to give children a good start in life is for them to be brought up in a stable and loving home? What is the Department doing to strengthen family relationships in this country?

**Damian Hinds:** I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that strong families can help social mobility and so much else. Our reform programme, “Putting children first”, aims to ensure that vulnerable children and families receive high-quality support as soon as need is identified.

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): As today’s shocking research from the National Education Union shows, one simple step that could help the most disadvantaged children is providing them with a healthy meal. It is more than two years since the Government committed to a healthy schools rating system. When will they act?

**Damian Hinds:** I am glad that the hon. Lady mentions the issue of providing meals for children at school. We have done a great deal on breakfast, and we have also extended eligibility for free school meals on three different occasions—in a way the Labour party never did when it was in government—through universal infant free school meals, free meals in further education colleges and, most recently, the roll-out of universal credit.

**Stephen Twigg** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): In 2015, I set up the Liverpool to Oxbridge collaborative, to encourage more students from schools in my constituency to apply to Oxford or Cambridge. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the 19 students who have had interviews this month at either Oxford or Cambridge and have been part of that scheme? Will his Department work with me to encourage other areas of the country, particularly those with high levels of deprivation and poverty, to adopt similar schemes?

**Damian Hinds:** I am delighted to do so on both counts. I commend the hon. Gentleman for his work in this area. Encouraging young people to aim higher—whether that is to Oxford, Cambridge or other universities, or into professions—is very worthwhile, and I certainly join him in what he says.

25. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The further education sector—famously an engine of social mobility—is now under threat from the insolvency regime that comes in next year. Karen Redhead has turned Ealing, Hammersmith and West London College around, but she would like assurance that the support mechanisms that allowed that will continue next year, so that such colleges do not just disappear down the plughole when the new rules kick in.

**Damian Hinds:** The framework that the hon. Lady mentions is, among other things, there to protect students studying at colleges. FE colleges have a central role to play in our system, particularly as we develop the apprenticeships programme and bring in T-levels.

**John Cryer** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The same NEU report shows that more children will be going hungry this winter than ever before, in the experience of most teachers. Is that helping or hindering social mobility?

**Damian Hinds:** I am pleased to be able to confirm to the hon. Gentleman that we have record levels of employment, which have helped to contribute to record levels of household income. We have brought in the national living wage and brought in tax cuts for millions of people—all to help to support working families’ household budgets.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Given that many apprentices are from disadvantaged backgrounds, will my right hon. Friend make sure that the apprenticeship...
levy is fit for purpose? A lot of employers are rebadging and retraining senior employees, and denying new apprentices the chance to do apprenticeships. Will he confirm that there is a £500 million overspend on the apprenticeship levy budget?

**Damian Hinds:** I can confirm to my right hon. Friend that it is of course very important that we continue to monitor the way in which the apprenticeship levy works. We have committed to having a review, and we will work with businesses on how it works after 2020 to make sure that young people, but also older people or people who are further into their careers, can benefit from this programme.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): According to UCAS figures, the number of young Scots from deprived backgrounds gaining a place at university is at an all-time high—firm proof that the Scottish Government’s policy of free tuition is working. Rather than become involved in creative accounting with student loans, will the Secretary of State now follow Scotland’s lead in improving social mobility, and scrap tuition fees?

**Damian Hinds:** The picture that the hon. Lady paints of the higher education sector in Scotland—it of course features many very high quality higher education institutions—is not the same one on admissions, I have to say, that I hear from everybody. I am pleased to be able to confirm that in England we have a record number and proportion of young people going on to university.

**Tracy Brabin** (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): The Social Mobility Commission’s recent survey revealed a deep unease at the gap between the rich and poor, with the public believing that the Government, employers and schools are not doing enough. The Secretary of State’s response to this urgent problem is to make £2 million available for more research, but there is still no concrete plan of action. Can he tell us exactly how much of the £2 million will be spent on the most important time for social mobility—the early years—and will it investigate the impact on the poorest children being locked out of 30 hours of free childcare?

**Damian Hinds:** The concern that the hon. Lady mentions is a concern shared by me—I want to go further and faster on social mobility—but I am not quite sure where the public is. I am pleased to be able to confirm that in England we have a record number and proportion of young people going on to university.

**SEND Services: Lancashire**

3. **Rosie Cooper** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What assessment has he made of progress on delivering the actions set out in the written statement of action issued in response to the 2017 inspection of services for children and young people with SEND in Lancashire.

---

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education** (Nadhim Zahawi): Lancashire produced a written statement of action, which Ofsted has assessed as fit for purpose. Advisers from the Department and NHS England are now monitoring and supporting the implementation of the written statement of action. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission will revisit the area in early 2020 to assess progress.

**Rosie Cooper:** Will the Minister indicate what funding is being made available to Lancashire County Council, for example through the high needs block of the dedicated schools grant, to enable it to fix the failings outlined in the Ofsted report, given that Lancashire County Council is already £10 million overspent and it is estimated that there is an overspend in this area of half a billion nationally?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** Yesterday, we announced that local authorities will receive an additional £250 million of high needs funding over two years, plus £100 million of capital funding to make more places available. That will take our total spend per annum on high needs funding to over £6 billion.

**Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): That answer shows that the Minister has his head in the sand. In addition to what is happening in Lancashire, new research for the Local Government Association shows that by 2020-21 there will be a potential £1.6 billion gap in funding for special educational needs and disabilities nationally. Given that there is no new money, according to what the Secretary of State said on the television at the weekend, when will the Government ensure that children with SEND are able to access the education they deserve?

**Nadhim Zahawi:** This is new money—£250 million plus £100 million for capital spending—from the underspend in the Department. The additional funding will help local authorities and schools with the increasing costs of provision for some of our most vulnerable children and young people. I think it is a shame that the Opposition are scaremongering in this way with the most vulnerable families in our society.

**Secondary School Standards**

4. **Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to raise standards in secondary schools.

**The Secretary of State for Education** (Damian Hinds): The dedication of teachers along with our reforms has seen the proportion of good or outstanding secondary schools increase from 64% to 75%, in terms of the pupils in them, between 2010 and 2018.

**Andrew Bridgen:** Unlike the vast majority of senior schools, most of my constituency still operates a middle and upper school system. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the all-through education model is better for raising standards and preferable to pupils having to move school only five terms before they take their GCSE exams? Will he do everything in his power to assist schools in North West Leicestershire that want to transition to the 11-to-16 model?
**Damian Hinds:** These decisions are best made at a local level in the light of the local circumstances, but to support schools that decide to change their age range, we publish online guidance for maintained schools and academies on the process involved. I am pleased that my hon. Friend is in touch with my right hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards.

**Lucy Powell** (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): During the recent Education Committee inquiry, we heard from many businesses and experts about how the current UK curriculum is taking us in the wrong direction. They said that it is about regurgitating knowledge rather than equipping young people with skills—communication skills, and the ability to do projects, science practicals and so on. Does the Secretary of State agree or disagree with those people?

**Damian Hinds:** If parents, employers and others heard us suggesting that there was some sort of conflict between knowledge and skills, they would despair. People need both when they come out of school. The development of skills is in many ways about knowing how to deploy knowledge. We believe that a knowledge-rich curriculum is incredibly important and helps to develop the skills that young people need for the world of work—and, indeed, for life.

**Theresa Villiers** (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that, if we are to continue to raise standards in schools, it is important that schools funding is given a high priority in next year’s spending review?

**Damian Hinds:** Indeed. Schools, and education more broadly, are a unique case in our national life because they are all about bringing up the next generation and social mobility, and ensuring that our economy works at its full productive potential.

**Peter Kyle** (Hove) (Lab): Ofsted has proved to be one of the most effective regulators in the country, but with cuts of almost 50%, inspections are too short and inspection teams are too small, and many schools simply do not get the inspections they need—some should require improvement or be in special measures and are not; and some good schools should be outstanding but are not. Will the Secretary of State commit to putting more resource into Ofsted so that parents can have faith that their schools are delivering for their students?

**Damian Hinds:** I have faith in the Ofsted system, which is an incredibly important part of our system alongside performance measures and so on. It is a vital part of what parents use to select their school. The new Ofsted framework, which is due to come in next year, is a further opportunity to develop that, but we want a proportionate system.

**STEM Subjects**

5. **Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the take-up of STEM subjects. [908213]

21. **Antoinette Sandbach** (Eddisbury) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the take-up of STEM subjects. [908229]

**The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills** (Anne Milton): The Government’s industrial strategy specifically targets STEM shortage skills. Between 2012 and 2018, entries to A-level maths rose by 25%. It is now the most popular A-level. Exam entries for GCSE computer science have increased from 2013, when it was first examined, from just over 4,000 to more than 70,000 in 2018. That is in part down to the £7.2 million funding that is going into maths hubs. A number of programmes have given STEM a real drive in schools and further education.¹

**Luke Graham:** I recently co-hosted a STEM workshop in Crieff High School in my constituency with the support of the Royal Navy. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to talk about what education opportunities we can provide across the United Kingdom working with educational institutions, the Ministry of Defence, the Department for International Development and the National Citizen Service?

**Anne Milton:** Well done to Crieff High School, the NCS, DFID and the Royal Navy. There is no doubt that weaving education into life jobs and everything we do with young people is how we get results. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend any time.

**Antoinette Sandbach:** When I visit STEM businesses in my constituency, I often ask how many of their apprentices are women. They say that there are not enough coming through the pipeline, the same excuse for why they do not have female directors. What is the Minister doing to increase the take-up by women and girls of STEM subjects?

**Anne Milton:** My hon. Friend is right that, without doubt, gender stereotypes affect what young girls do. Those stereotypes are changing because we are making sure that we change them. For instance, since 2010 we have seen 26% more women entering STEM A-levels. However, we recognise that the take-up for physics is notably low and we have put money into the Stimulating Physics Network. I praise hon. Members who have taken part in the Year of Engineering. We know that at primary school girls and boys have similar levels of interest in STEM subjects, but that that tails off quite substantially at secondary school. We are doing research to understand that better.¹

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Students from Coleg Gwent had great success recently at the WorldSkills UK competition, including a gold in forensic science, which is a great advert for taking up STEM subjects. Will the Minister join me in congratulating all Welsh students and colleges who did fantastically well across the board in that UK-wide competition?

**Anne Milton:** Yes, I am very happy to join the hon. Lady in congratulating them. Right hon. and hon. Members who do not know anything about WorldSkills should take a look—that is fantastic. I am disappointed that the Scottish Government have chosen not to put in any money, despite its success. WorldSkills is a way of showcasing exactly what young people can achieve.

**Carol Monaghan** (Glasgow North West) (SNP): I was about to thank the Minister for her positive comments about STEM, however I should point out that the Scottish Government properly fund further education.¹

---

¹ [Official Report, 20 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 5MC]
STEM careers are still not attracting enough young people and we have a continuing need to tap into Europe's talent streams. Does the Minister share my concern that limited uptake of STEM subjects, now coupled with potential restrictions on EU nationals based on salary, is a serious issue? What discussions has she had with the Home Secretary on keeping the EU talent pipeline open?

Anne Milton: It is extremely important that we use talent from wherever it comes. I reiterate that I am disappointed at the Scottish Government for refusing my invitation to put some money into WorldSkills. This is an opportunity to boost engineering careers and choices, particularly for women. I am disappointed in the Scottish Government's attitude.

School Places: England

6. Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to increase the number of good school places in England.  

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): There are 1.9 million more pupils in good or outstanding schools compared with 2010 and we are on track to create 1 million places this decade. That compares with a loss of 100,000 places in the six years up to 2010.  

Mr Marcus Jones (Nuneaton) (Con): A badly planned new housing development is putting enormous strain on school places in my constituency, particularly primary places. We have a new school that will open in 2019, but the funding process through the Education and Skills Funding Agency has been very elongated and bureaucratic. I would be grateful if my right hon. Friend could say how the process can be simplified, so that in future we can ensure that the supply of good new school places matches the demand in areas where there is new development.

Damian Hinds: I thank my hon. Friend for his support on the Lower Farm primary academy. The Department is always looking for ways to improve our processes, driving efficiency and value. That now includes the establishment of a specialist property company and the use of modern construction methods to help to build schools faster. I am very grateful to him for his helpful feedback.

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am deeply concerned that schools are using isolation rooms as a form of unregistered exclusion for pupils for extended periods of time, thereby severely harming their education. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of how good the education is that is received by the children forced into using them?

Damian Hinds: We think it is up to headteachers, within the rules, to set the behaviour policy in their schools. They have to set it out clearly in their behaviour policy, on which there are clear guidelines.

Sir David Evennett (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend welcome the rising percentage of good and outstanding places in special schools, meaning that no matter what challenges someone faces, real opportunities are on offer for all?

Damian Hinds: I do welcome that. As part of yesterday's announcement, we also said that we would take off the cap on the current round of special and alternative provision free school applications and approve the full set that met the criteria.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Good school places include good school music teaching, but headteachers tell me that they cannot afford to provide high-quality music education, which flows into a lack of access to tertiary places. We have more international students studying at tertiary level than we do our domestic students in some cases. Will the Government urgently review the provision of high-quality music education, so that every child, regardless of their region, background, skin colour or religion, can study music at our wonderful universities?

Damian Hinds: I agree with the hon. Lady about the essential importance of music. That is one reason why music is the second most financially supported subject in our school system, after PE. We have invested £300 million in funding for music hubs and other music programmes between 2016 and 2020.

Air Quality: School Sites

7. Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): What plans he has to ensure that all schools monitor air quality at their sites.  

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): Local authorities are responsible for air quality and must ensure that it meets the standards set in local air quality action plans. If there was concern about the air quality in a school building, it would fall to the body responsible for the school to check that and establish what measures needed to be taken to improve air quality.

Mr Sheerman: Will the Minister and the Government take air pollution in our country and the effect that it has on children's brains far more seriously? A target of doing something about air pollution in our country by 2040 is not good enough. The research evidence shows that children's brains are being affected now and more so in homes where incomes are lower and in ethnic minority homes.

Nick Gibb: The Government take the safety of pupils extremely seriously. We recently published technical guidance on air quality in schools. This takes into account the latest developments in air quality management and monitoring to support the design of new schools, and it promotes best practice and covers air quality as a matter of controlling both external and internal pollutants and setting maximum standards for levels of pollutants in classrooms.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): The Minister will know that a controversial housing development on the A27, one of the busiest roads in the south-east, includes plans for a new school. Local air pollution monitoring equipment does not even work. Does he not think that it is crazy to put a new school right next to such a busy road and should that not be a planning consideration when locating schools in future?
Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend raises an important point; we take air quality very seriously. It is a matter for West Sussex County Council to ensure that every school that is built in that county has high-quality air for the pupils in those schools.

Education Funding

8. Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): What recent comparative assessment he has made of the level of education funding in England and other countries.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): OECD data shows that the UK spends as much per pupil on state school education as any major economy in the world, apart from the United States. However we cut the data, the UK is among the highest spenders, and that is also true when we look at expenditure as a share of GDP.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the Minister for that answer, and I welcome the work that he is doing to ensure that we compare well internationally, but will he continue to work with me to ensure that that funding is equitably distributed within England? I am thinking particularly of a fairer share for places such as Devon.

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend fights hard for the interests of the schools in his constituency, as I know at first hand from the schools that he has invited me to visit and the headteachers to whom he has introduced me at round-table discussions that he has organised on school funding. He will know, therefore, that under the fairer national funding formula, Devon will gain £13.6 million for its schools by 2019-20, rising from £382 million to £396 million in 2019.

20. [908228] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Turning to further education, funding for students aged 16 to 19 has fallen by 8% since 2010 according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies—the biggest squeeze of any part of the education budget—and the Government announced last week that the base funding rate for 16 to 19-year-olds would be frozen for the seventh year running. Does the Minister agree with the chief inspector of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, who says that the “sustainability and quality” of further education and skills provision have been hit by the cuts to their funding?

Nick Gibb: Of course, we have guaranteed the amount per pupil for post 16, but we understand the constraints of post-16 funding. There is £500 million extra a year coming into the FE sector with the introduction of T-levels.

Ben Bradley (Mansfield) (Con): The Education Committee is conducting an inquiry into special educational needs and disability funding and provision. Does my right hon. Friend recognise that improving SEND support would go a long way to helping give schools financial breathing space, given the extent that it impinges on schools’ core budgets?

Nick Gibb: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. High needs funding for children and young people with more complex SEN has risen by more than £1 billion since 2013. It is now £6 billion. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State announced yesterday, there will be another £125 million this year and another £125 million next year for high needs.

Mr Speaker: I gently exhort the Minister of State to face the House so that we can all benefit from his mellifluous tones.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The level of educational funding will be radically affected by the new treatment of public sector pensions. Can the Minister confirm that it is the Government’s policy to cover the majority of costs for schools and colleges, but not for universities, and explain the different treatment?

Nick Gibb: Yes, I can confirm that.

Foreign Languages in Schools

10. Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps he is taking to support the take-up of foreign languages in schools.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): The Government’s ambition is that 90% of pupils will study the EBacc combination of GCSEs, including a foreign language, by 2025. We offer generous financial incentives to recruit more language teachers, and we have introduced the Mandarin excellence programme and modern foreign languages—MFL—teaching hubs to increase languages take-up and to support schools to improve the quality of foreign languages teaching.

Jamie Stone: I thank the Minister for his answer. One way to stimulate learning foreign languages in our schools is by using foreign exchange students. Indeed, in my school days, a charming French lady greatly stimulated my knowledge of the language. I am not a member of the governing party in Scotland. I therefore ask whether Her Majesty’s Government will do everything they can to continue using exchange students and to build on that in future.

Mr Speaker: I think the whole House would digest the hon. Gentleman’s personal memoir. We are indebted to him for it.

Nick Gibb: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point and I can absolutely confirm that.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): The Europa School in my constituency teaches languages by teaching other subjects in foreign languages. Does my right hon. Friend accept that that is proving popular with parents of all types, including from the UK, and that it is a good model to follow?

Nick Gibb: I share my hon. Friend’s admiration for the Europa School. It teaches the European baccalaureate, which is of a very high standard. The continuation of that qualification will depend on discussions with the European Schools system after the UK leaves the European Union.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): There has been a significant contraction in the post-16 modern languages curriculum as a result of the significant funding cut.
Funding has been frozen since 2013-14. Is it not time to raise the rate so that that curriculum can get back to where it should be?

Nick Gibb: To make A-level foreign languages classes viable, we need more sixth formers to opt for the subjects. To raise the uptake of A-level, we first need to increase the number of pupils who take a GCSE in a foreign language, reversing the damage caused by the last Labour Government in 2004, when they downgraded the importance of languages.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): My right hon. Friend may recall that schools used to teach Latin to give a better understanding of English grammar. Does he agree that German, Spanish and Italian give a better understanding of grammar than French? When will we get some teachers of those languages?

Nick Gibb: Of course, we need all those European languages, as well as Mandarin and other languages, to be taught in our secondary schools. Since 2010, there has been an increase from 40% of the cohort taking a GCSE in a foreign language to 46% this year. However, we need to go further, which is why we have the target of 90% studying the EBacc combination of GCSEs by 2025.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Non, nee and nein are among the European words the Prime Minister has learned this week, but a generation of children is being denied the same opportunity, with nearly 20,000 fewer hours of modern languages taught in secondary schools now compared with 2010. The decline is particularly stark in German and French. Will the Minister commit today to reversing that trend, or is it only the Prime Minister who is being taught a lesson?

Nick Gibb: I must say, it is rich for Opposition Members to criticise the reduction in modern foreign language teaching. It was their Government—the Labour Government, in 2004—who downgraded the importance of foreign languages, and we are trying to reverse that. We have increased the proportion of young people studying a foreign language from 40% in 2010 to 46% this year, and we want to go further.

Social Work Profession

11. Mr Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): What progress his Department has made on strengthening the social work profession. [908219]

12. Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): What progress his Department has made on strengthening the social work profession. [908220]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): Social workers do an invaluable job in protecting the most vulnerable children and families in our society. We are improving initial education standards, and providing professional development at key stages throughout a social worker's career. A new independent regulator, Social Work England, will have a strong focus on better standards, while the national assessment and accreditation system will provide additional confidence in the quality of practice.

Mr Goodwill: The independent regulator will help to raise still further the already high standards of practice in social work. Does the Minister agree that social workers who achieve accreditation status should also earn the right to put some initials after their names—for example, ASW, standing for “accredited social worker”?

Nadhim Zahawi: My right hon. Friend is right to point out that the national assessment and accreditation system is a critical means of embedding high standards in the social work profession. We are currently in phase 1, and more than 100 social workers have been accredited so far. We will be considering questions like my right hon. Friend's during the national roll-out.

Alex Burghart: Initiatives such as Step Up to Social Work and Frontline have done a very good job in bringing high-qualities graduates into the profession, but what is the Department doing to encourage better continuing professional development for those who are already in the workforce?

Nadhim Zahawi: Continuing professional development is crucial to high-quality social work. The Department funds it through the assessed and supported year in employment for new social workers, and an aspiring practice leaders programme. This autumn we launched a programme for more than 1,000 people moving into supervisory roles.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that early help services delivered by social workers were vital. What assessment has he made of the proposals to abolish 90 social work jobs in Derbyshire—where the number of children in care has risen by 50% in the last five years—and to transfer the early help service to schools?

Nadhim Zahawi: In the Budget we announced a further £410 million for local authorities to invest in adults’ and children’s social care services in 2019-20. We also announced £84 million to scale up good practice from, for instance, Leeds, Hertfordshire and North Yorkshire to 20 other local authorities. We hope that places such as Derbyshire will look at those models and scale up that good practice.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I know that the Minister will want to join me in congratulating Frontline not just on bringing 1,000 people into the profession, but on elevating the status of social work. Does he recognise, however, that notwithstanding the additional investment to which he has just referred, unless we deal effectively with the funding crisis facing children’s social services, we will not be able to keep and promote those people who do such wonderful work in keeping children and young people safe and well?

Nadhim Zahawi: The hon. Gentleman has made an important point about funding. We are working with the sector, and with the Local Government Association, to ensure that we are in a good place for the spending review.

Cost of Living: Higher Education

13. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the financial effect on students in higher education of the current cost of living. [908221]
The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): It is good to be back at the Dispatch Box.

The most recent assessment of the living costs of English-domiciled full-time and part-time undergraduates was the 2014-15 student income and expenditure survey, which found that the average living costs of full-time undergraduates were about £7,000.

Afzal Khan: According to a recent report in the Huffington Post, the living costs of students in Manchester have rocketed by 37% in the last 10 years. Cost should not be a barrier to accessing the country’s best universities, such as the University of Manchester. What is the Minister doing to encourage universities to keep students’ costs affordable?

Chris Skidmore: Students who started their courses in the current academic year have had access to the highest ever funding levels to support their living costs. We now have a system of support that targets those from the lowest-income families, who need it the most. A record number of 18-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds went to university this year, 68% more than in 2009.1

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): As a fellow historian, I warmly congratulate the Minister on his appointment, although I am afraid that he arrives to a perfect storm for students, battered by high tuition fees and extortionate interest, with evidence now piling up from freedom of information requests—the latest in The Huffington Post report that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) has just referred to—that many are unable to cope with spiralling accommodation costs in London and other cities. Yet recent questions I put to the Department on what it is doing about this got the answer that it was not a Government issue. On the day we are told that the London Business School head gets a half a million Government issue. On the day we are told that the London Business School head gets a half a million

The most recent assessment of the living costs of

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the adequacy of the level of support for SEND learners.

1.[Official Report, 20 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 6MC.]
Mike Amesbury: Last week, it was confirmed that teachers and students at Sir John Deane’s sixth-form college in my constituency and elsewhere will lose out yet again following the confirmation that the national funding rate for sixth formers will remain at £4,000 per student next year. That is the seventh consecutive year that funding has been frozen. How can the Secretary of State claim that austerity is over?

Damian Hinds: It is true that five-to-16 education funding in this country has been protected since 2010 and that that pledge did not apply to sixth forms. Yes, funding has been tight for sixth forms and that is one of the things we will consider when looking at future funding.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): The first three T-levels—digital and construction in particular—are on track for teaching from 2020, and we have recently announced seven more for introduction in 2021. This is the way we build skills—by making sure that pre-16 and post-16 education gives young people the drive, desire and ambition to succeed at whatever level. The industry is a critical component of T-levels, and this will be an ideal opportunity for local employers to build local skills.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Over the weekend, the former Universities Minister, the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), suggested that the Prime Minister was not acting in the national interest. On that theme, the hon. Member for Orpington (Joseph Johnson) has said:

“I was in strong disagreement with keeping foreign students in the immigration cap. The sooner it is dropped, the better.”

I am glad that he agrees with us on that. We have been told to expect the immigration White Paper later this week. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether it will finally take students out of the migration target, allowing the Government to find at least one policy that the majority of this House and indeed the country can support?

Damian Hinds: I fear that the hon. Lady is mistaken. Our higher education sector rightly attracts students from around the world, thanks to its great quality, and we want to grow the number of students coming to our universities. There is no limit on the number of students who can come to our universities. I think she is referring to the statistical measurement, which is an international measurement that defines people who come to this country for more than 12 months as being in the immigration statistics, but of course, when they leave again, they count as minus 1 in those statistics.

T8. [908241] Robert Courts (Witney) (Con): West Oxfordshire has a plethora of high-tech engineering companies, including ICE Oxford, Polar Technology, Siemens, Owen Mumford, and Abbott. What progress is being made with T-levels to ensure that those vital local employers have access to the local high-quality skills they need?

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills (Anne Milton): The first three T-levels—digital and construction in particular—are on track for teaching from 2020, and we have recently announced seven more for introduction in 2021. This is the way we build skills—by making sure that pre-16 and post-16 education gives young people the drive, desire and ambition to succeed at whatever level. The industry is a critical component of T-levels, and this will be an ideal opportunity for local employers to build local skills.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern about a creeping culture of censorship taking hold on some of our university campuses?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government are deeply committed to protecting freedom of speech in higher education. The Equality and Human Rights Commission and key partners in the higher education sector worked with the previous Universities Minister—to whom I pay tribute as a friend and colleague—to develop a single piece of guidance that will set out key principles. This will enable universities and student unions to understand their obligations to protect and support free speech, which must happen in our universities.

T2. [908235] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Parents and staff in maintained nursery schools are waiting for the Government to stop dithering on future funding. Excellent schools in Cambridge and all over the country face a funding cliff edge next year. Can the Minister give them the assurance they need, and commit today to the future of our maintained nursery schools?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Nadhim Zahawi): We have made £60 million available to maintained nursery schools up to 2020 because of the excellent provision that they deliver. My message, and that of the Secretary of State, to local authorities is not to take any decisions until we get to the spending review.

Chris Skidmore: Delivering an EU deal is the Government’s top priority, and we do not want a no-deal scenario. However, a responsible Government should prepare for every eventuality, including the possibility of no deal. We have already guaranteed the rights of EU residents in the UK by 29 March 2019, and we are calling on EU member states to do the same for UK nationals. For education, that will mean that they have broadly the same entitlements to work, study and access to public services and benefits as now. In addition, the
Government have made an underwrite guarantee that will cover all committed payments to UK participants in programmes such as the European social fund and Erasmus Plus.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): The Schools Minister will be aware of the concerns in Torbay schools around the consultation on the high needs funding formula, so we welcome the additional funding announced yesterday. Will he confirm whether the indicative amounts per council will be published?

**The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):** Yes, I can confirm that the allocations to local authorities from the £125 million that the Secretary of State announced yesterday will be published imminently.

**Chris Skidmore** As I have already stated, the Government are committed to ensuring that we have a deal with the European Union. A deal will ensure that we have stability and security going forward after 29 March 2019, but we have also committed to putting in place protections to ensure that our HE institutions are protected under a no-deal scenario.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating the fabulous University Centre Somerset, part of Bridgwater & Taunton College, on being awarded centre of the year in the Lion awards for innovation across the centre in learning, vocational courses and apprenticeships? It is a phenomenal establishment.

**Anne Milton:** I will happily join my hon. Friend in congratulating that institution. What a wonderful story it is. Apprenticeships are how we ensure that young people have opportunities that would otherwise not be open to them.

**T4. [908237]** **Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): A report from the Science and Technology Committee in the other place points out that the UK’s influential position will be diminished if we are cut off from EU funding, shared research facilities and the to and fro of talented researchers as a result of Brexit. Does the Secretary of State think that is an acceptable outcome, stemming from his party’s internal civil war over Europe?

**Nick Gibb:** We are spending record amounts on school funding—£43.5 billion by next year—we recruited 2,600 more people into teaching last year, which is an 8% rise on the prior year, and record numbers of pupils are taking A-level maths.

**Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): Two grammar schools in Walsall have benefited from the selective schools expansion fund, but does the Minister endorse the work that they are doing to improve access for disadvantaged children?

**Damian Hinds:** Yes. The selective schools expansion fund was targeted precisely at ensuring that grammar schools that do not yet admit enough pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and on free schools meals are encouraged to admit such pupils. I have been very encouraged by the applications that we have seen from the 16 successful schools, and I look forward to seeing their establishment.

**Damian Hinds:** Yes. The selective schools expansion fund was targeted precisely at ensuring that grammar schools that do not yet admit enough pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and on free schools meals are encouraged to admit such pupils. I have been very encouraged by the applications that we have seen from the 16 successful schools, and I look forward to seeing their establishment.

**Mr Speaker:** One sentence of fewer than 20 words.

**Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): Some 3,000 parents have signed a petition against King Edward VI School’s policy now of attracting students by catchment area, rather than by the 11-plus. What is my right hon. Friend’s view of the petition?
Damian Hinds: I think it is right that parents are consulted on these important matters, but I also think it is important that our selective schools and grammar schools, which are very popular with parents, should also be extending their reach and making sure they are accessible to a wider group of pupils.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: One short sentence.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Despite the Government’s warm words, headteachers tell me that they do not have enough money for children with special needs. What comfort can the Secretary of State give to the headteachers of maintained schools in my constituency of Bristol West that children with special educational needs will have the funding they need in 2019?

Damian Hinds: I recognise the issues on the tightness of funding for special needs, which is one of the reasons why yesterday we announced the package that includes not only additional revenue funding but provision for more capital funding towards facilities, for more places, for more training for educational psychologists and for making sure that all teachers have the support and training they need.
3.31 pm

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on last week’s European Council. But before turning to Brexit, let me touch on two significant conclusions from the other business of the Council.

First, we expressed our utmost concern over the escalation we have seen at the Kerch strait and the sea of Azov, and over Russia’s continued violations of international law. We agreed to roll over economic sanctions against Russia, and we stand ready further to strengthen our support, in particular for the affected areas of Ukraine. Secondly, we also agreed to work together on tackling the spread of deliberate, large-scale and systematic disinformation, including as part of hybrid warfare. On this I outlined some of the world-leading work that the UK is doing in this field. And I was clear that, after we have left the European Union, the UK will continue to work closely with our European partners to uphold the international rules-based system and to keep all our people safe. That is why it is right that our Brexit deal includes the deepest security partnership that has ever been agreed with the EU.

At this Council, I faithfully and firmly reflected the concerns of this House over the Northern Ireland backstop. I explained that the assurances we have already agreed with the EU were insufficient for this House, and that we have to go further in showing that we never want to use this backstop, and if it is used, it must be a temporary arrangement. Some of the resulting exchanges at this Council were robust, but I make no apology for standing up for the interests of this House and the interests of our whole United Kingdom.

In response, the EU27 published a series of conclusions making it clear that it is their “firm determination to work speedily on a subsequent agreement that establishes by 31 December 2020 alternative arrangements, so that the backstop will not need to be triggered.”

The House will forgive me, but I think this bears repeating: the backstop will not need to be triggered. The conclusions underline that “if the backstop were nevertheless to be triggered, it would apply temporarily”, And that in this event, the EU “would use its best endeavours to negotiate and conclude expeditiously a subsequent agreement that would replace the backstop”.

And the EU27 gave a new assurance, in relation to the future partnership with the UK, to make it even less likely that the backstop would ever be needed by stating that the EU “stands ready to embark on preparations immediately after signature of the Withdrawal Agreement to ensure that negotiations can start as soon as possible after the UK’s withdrawal.”

In these conclusions, in their statements at the Council and in their private meetings with me, my fellow EU leaders could not have been clearer: they do not want to use this backstop. They want to agree the best possible future relationship with us. There is no plot to keep us in the backstop. Indeed, President Macron said on Friday that:

"we can clarify and reassure...the backstop is not our objective, it is not a durable solution and nobody is trying to lock the UK into the backstop.”

As formal conclusions from a European Council, these commitments have legal status and should be welcomed. They go further than the EU has ever done previously in trying to address the concerns of this House. And of course they sit on top of the commitments that we have already negotiated in relation to the backstop, including ensuring that the customs element is UK-wide; that both sides are legally committed to using best endeavours to have our new relationship in place before the end of the implementation period; that if the new relationship is not ready, we can choose to extend the implementation period instead of the backstop coming into force; that if the backstop does come in, we can use alternative arrangements, not just the future relationship, to get out of it; that the treaty is clear the backstop can only ever be temporary; and that there is an explicit termination clause.

However, I know this House is still deeply uncomfortable about the backstop—I understand that, and I want us to go further still in the reassurances we secure. Discussions with my EU partners, including Presidents Tusk and Juncker, and others, have shown that further clarification following the Council’s conclusions is, in fact, possible. So discussions are continuing to explore further political and legal assurances. We are also looking closely at new ways of empowering the House of Commons to ensure that any provision for a backstop has democratic legitimacy—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is very irregular. The statement must be heard. There will be a full opportunity for exchanges, but the statement by the Prime Minister must be heard and heard with courtesy.

The Prime Minister: We are looking at new ways of empowering the House of Commons to ensure that any provision for a backstop has democratic legitimacy and enabling the House to place its own obligations on the Government to ensure that the backstop cannot be in place indefinitely. But it is now only just over 14 weeks until the UK leaves the EU, and I know many Members of this House are concerned that we need to take a decision soon. My right hon. Friend the Leader of the House will set out business on Thursday in the usual way, but I can confirm today that we intend to return to the meaningful vote debate in the week commencing 7 January and hold the vote the following week.

When we have the vote, Members will need to reflect carefully on what is in the best interests of our country. I know that there are a range of very strongly held personal views on this issue across the House, and I respect all of them. But expressing our personal views is not what we are here to do. We asked the British people to take this decision; 472 current Members of this House voted for the referendum in June 2015, with just 32 voting against. The British people responded by instructing us to leave the European Union. Similarly, 438 current Members of this House voted to trigger article 50, to set the process of our departure in motion, with only 85 of today’s Members voting against. Now we must honour our duty to finish the job.

I know this is not everyone’s perfect deal—it is a compromise—but if we let the perfect be the enemy of the good, we risk leaving the EU with no deal. Of course, we have prepared for no deal, and tomorrow the Cabinet will be discussing the next phase in ensuring we
are ready for that scenario. But let us not risk the jobs, services and security of the people we serve by turning our backs on an agreement with our neighbours that honours the referendum and provides for a smooth and orderly exit. Avoiding no deal is only possible if we can reach an agreement or if we abandon Brexit entirely.

As I said in the debate earlier this month, do not imagine that if we vote this down, a different deal is going to miraculously appear. If you want proof, look at the conclusions of this Council. As President Juncker said, it is the “best deal possible” and the “only deal possible”. Any proposal for the future relationship—whether Norway, Canada, or any other variety that has been mentioned—would require agreeing this withdrawal agreement. The Leader of the Opposition and some others are trying to pretend that they could do otherwise. This is a fiction.

Finally, let us not break faith with the British people by trying to stage another referendum—another vote that would do irreparable damage to the integrity our politics, because it—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Many Members of this House, including an illustrious Chair of a Select Committee, are heckling noisily. Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil, you are a cheeky chappy, but we need much less of the cheek and more by way of courtesy in listening to the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Another vote would do irreparable damage to the integrity of our politics, because it would say to millions who trusted in democracy that our democracy does not deliver. Another vote would likely leave us no further forward than the last, and another vote would further divide our country at the very moment we should be working to unite it. And let us not follow the Leader of the Opposition in thinking about what gives him the best chance of forcing a general election, for at this critical moment in our history we should be thinking not about our party’s interests, but about the national interest. Let us find a way to come together and work together in the national interest to see this Brexit through.

I will work tirelessly over these new few weeks to fulfil my responsibility as Prime Minister to find a way forwards. Over the past two weeks, I have met quite a number of colleagues on this important issue, and I am happy to continue to do so, so that we can fulfil our responsibilities to the British people so that together we can take back control of our borders, laws and money, while protecting the jobs, security and integrity of our precious United Kingdom; so that together we can move on to finalising the future relationship with the European Union and the trade deals with the rest of the world that can fuel our prosperity for years to come; and so that together we can get this Brexit done and shift the national focus to our domestic priorities: investing in our NHS, our schools and housing, tackling the injustices that so many still face, and building a country that truly works for everyone. For these are the ways in which, together, this House will best serve the interests of the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

3.43 pm
Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the advance copy of her statement.

On Ukraine, as NATO has said, we need both sides to show restraint and de-escalate, with international law adhered to, including Russia’s allowing unhindered access to Ukraine’s ports on the sea of Azov.

We face an unprecedented situation: the Prime Minister has led us into a national crisis. If any more evidence was needed of why we face this grave situation, the Prime Minister demonstrated it at last week’s summit. There were some warm words drafted, but the Prime Minister even managed to negotiate those away, to be replaced by words about preparing for no deal. The Prime Minister boasted:

“I had a robust discussion with President Juncker”, but that cannot hide the cold reality that she achieved nothing. Standing at the Dispatch Box last week, the Prime Minister said,

“I have made some progress”.—[Official Report, 12 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 274.]

She has not made any progress at all.

She said so herself while still in Brussels:

“The EU is clear, as am I, that this is the deal.”

The European Commission has been categorical. It said:

“It will not be renegotiated. The European Council has given the clarifications that were possible at this stage, so no further meetings with the UK are foreseen.”

The deal is unchanged and it is not going to change. The House must get on with the vote and move on to consider the realistic alternatives. There can be no logical reason for this delay, except that, in taking shambolic government to a new level, the Prime Minister no longer has the backing of her Cabinet. The International Trade Secretary has suggested that the Prime Minister’s deal no longer has the backing of the Cabinet. It is worth quoting his words. He said:

“I think that it is very difficult to support the deal if we don’t get changes to the backstop. I don’t think it will get through. I am not even sure if the Cabinet will agree for it to be put to the House of Commons.”

We have had the spectacle of the past few days with numerous Cabinet members coming forward with their own alternatives. The International Trade Secretary suggested that a two-year transition to a no deal is an option. The Work and Pensions Secretary says that the Government need “to try something different” and build a consensus in Parliament. The Attorney General is reported as saying that he wants the Prime Minister gone and for the deal to be renegotiated, while the International Development Secretary is allegedly liaising with the European Research Group to launch an alternative option. Others are reportedly working on a second referendum, but if even the Cabinet no longer backs the deal, then who knows what the options would be?

Will the Prime Minister give us some answers? First, does her deal still have the confidence of the Cabinet? Secondly, is Cabinet collective responsibility still in operation? Thirdly, does it remain Government policy to avoid a no-deal outcome? An unacceptable deal is on the table. No amendment has been secured. Renegotiations have been rebuffed and not even mere assurances have been offered. The Prime Minister’s shoddy deal no longer even has the backing of the Cabinet.

The Prime Minister ran away from putting her deal before Parliament, because even her own Cabinet has doubts, and she herself admits that Parliament will not
Mr Speaker: Order. I am not having the right hon. Gentleman shouted down. I say very gently to a Government Whip, do not stand near the Chair and shout at your colleagues. If you are going to do that, leave the Chamber and we will manage perfectly adequately without you.

Mr Mitchell: Does my right hon. Friend not think it would be wiser to seek an extension to article 50, rather than to leave with no deal?

The Prime Minister: I do not think it is right to seek an extension of article 50. What Parliament will be faced with is a decision to exercise its responsibility to deliver on the referendum vote and to deliver Brexit. I continue to believe that this is a good deal. Yes, we are seeking further reassurances, but I continue to believe that we can leave with a good deal and that this is it.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of her statement.

I have to ask, “Where is the leadership?”—a phrase that is often used. We thought that the Prime Minister had reached rock bottom, but she is still digging. We have four sitting days left in this place before the Christmas recess. We are then left with the narrow window, when we return in January, to find a way forward out of the Government’s Brexit timetable. It cannot be done.

After two years of negotiation, the Prime Minister has designed a deal that she knows she cannot deliver. It does not have the support of this House. It is time to call time on this Government. They are a laughing stock. Companies and their workers do not know if we are going to crash out of the European Union in three months’ time. We have just over 100 days to prepare for the risk of a no-deal outcome that most sensible folk would reject as unacceptable.

The Prime Minister is playing a game of brinkmanship. The European Council President, Donald Tusk, was clear when he said:

“I have no mandate to organise any further negotiations.”

What more does the Prime Minister need to hear to know that her deal is dead? This is embarrassing. The Prime Minister might be prepared to be embarrassed by this shambles, but the rest of us are not. Parliament needs to take control of this situation and seek to find a solution that prevents a risk to jobs and prosperity. It is the people of our countries that we are talking about.

Today the Prime Minister tells us that there are no other options. That is not the case. Standing before Parliament ruling out another referendum on EU membership is an act of desperation from the Prime Minister. Knowing that she cannot get her own deal through this place, she wants to silence debate. Having taken away Parliament’s voice—our right to a meaningful vote—she now wants us to take away the right of the people to vote: their democratic right to have their say; their democratic right to change their mind.

I plead with the Prime Minister to put all options back on the table. Stop operating in isolation; reach out and speak to the Opposition parties. We all have a responsibility to protect our citizens. It is time to move beyond the narrow party politics with which this place operates; it is time to operate in the interests of all
our nations. I ask her to bring forward the meaningful vote on her deal before the Christmas recess. There is no reason to delay. Let us have that meaningful vote this week.

Lastly, will the Prime Minister do the right thing and meet me and other Opposition party leaders this week, collectively? This is the true test of this Government’s word. If we are to believe that we are a partnership of equals, then now, today, we must be heard.

The Prime Minister: First, I am happy to say to the right hon. Gentleman that if he wants to come to talk to me about this issue, I am happy to talk to him about it. But we do have a fundamental difference of opinion that was revealed in his party’s response to what I said in my statement: I believe that we should deliver leaving the EU for the British people, and he believes we should stay in the EU, so that is a fundamental difference that we have. He talks about putting jobs and prosperity first. This deal does just that. It delivers on the referendum while protecting jobs and prosperity. He says he does not want to leave with no deal. Well, the only way to ensure that we do not leave having no deal is to support a deal. And may I just remind him gently that 56% of Scots voted for pro-Brexit parties?

Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): The report by the Independent Commission on Referendums published earlier this year recommended that any second referendum on a subject “should be specified in the legislation enabling the first referendum, so that the requirement for or possibility of a second referendum, and the reason for it, is clear to the electorate before the first vote takes place.”

Does the Prime Minister agree that no such provision was made, and that calling for a second referendum at this stage is merely a ruse to try to reverse the result and is not in the nation’s interests?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for pointing that out to the House. Of course, it is absolutely the case that there was no suggestion, when the referendum was put to the people in 2016, that there might be a second referendum. People were told—that their vote would be delivered by the Government of the time subsequently, and that is what I believe it is certainly in our interests, as a Government, to do. We should deliver on that vote and leave the European Union.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Prime Minister may be aware that the bookmakers have been offering 66-1 against her deal passing Parliament, but even money on a referendum and even money on her then winning it. Could it be that the Cabinet Ministers who are known to be preparing for a referendum are not being disloyal to her but are simply better at maths?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure that the right hon. Gentleman should spend too much time in the betting shops. I am not sure that the odds on the Liberal Democrats are very good at all.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that, despite the European Council’s so-called legal endorsement of the withdrawal agreement, which it says is not open for renegotiation, this agreement has not been initialled or signed by her and is only a draft—it is no more than a political agreement under which nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, including the backstop—and therefore she can still walk away?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly confirm that this deal has been negotiated between the UK and the European Union, but it has to go through certain processes in order to be ratified. Part of that is ratification here in the United Kingdom Parliament, and part is ratification in the European Parliament. It is those processes that lead to the final agreement and the withdrawal agreement.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I am sure the Prime Minister agrees that European Council conclusions and declarations are political statements. The Council has talked about clarifications and reassurances but ruled out renegotiating, contradicting or reopening the legal text. Indeed, it even struck out language saying that the backstop did not represent a desirable outcome for the EU27. Will the Prime Minister tell us exactly what she is asking for to deliver on the key concerns about the legally binding and indefinite nature of the backstop, with no right for this country to exit it on its own terms?

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): As others have said, on Thursday it will be 100 days until Britain leaves the European Union. At the moment, we have no deal and no plan B. This is a constitutional crisis because this House is not being allowed to express its will on behalf of our communities, who around the country are telling us that they reject this deal. That is why MPs want to be able to vote against it.

It is pointless criticising Members who are coming up with other solutions, whether it is a second referendum or Canada or Norway-style deals. We as a Parliament are trying to find a solution to the political cul-de-sac and mess that we find this country in. It was clear back in the summer that the Prime Minister’s deal was not going to succeed. She is now not only not listening; she is not allowing debate. This is totally unacceptable. Will she agree to bring the vote before the House before Christmas, so that she can reflect on the outcome over the Christmas break and then lead us?

The Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend and I have different opinions on the issue of a second referendum. I have indicated when the vote will be brought back to the House. It will be necessary for the usual channels to agree what the business motion would be and how many days of debate would be available. We are not trying to stop debate. I am trying to—[Interruption.]
[The Prime Minister]

I am recognising and reflecting to the European Union the concerns expressed in this House and seeking ways in which we can ensure that Members have sufficient confidence that those concerns have been addressed.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Prime Minister went to the European Council seeking legal assurances and returned with none, and the next Council meeting scheduled is in the third week of March. Now that Cabinet Ministers are openly speculating about what should happen when her deal is defeated, can she tell the House what purpose it serves to continue to pretend that we might leave the European Union without an agreement, when she knows better than anyone else how damaging and disastrous that would be, and when she told the House just now that it would risk the “jobs, services and security” of the people?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I have responded on this point previously. We do have—this House has—a responsibility, and it will have a responsibility, to come to a decision on this matter and to determine whether to leave the European Union with a deal or to leave without a deal. There will also be those in this House who will try to ensure that, actually, we stay in the European Union. I think that would be wrong. I think we should be leaving the European Union, because that is what people voted for in the biggest exercise of democracy in our history. I believe that we should be leaving with a good deal, and this is it.

Dominic Raab (Esher and Walton) (Con): The final steps of contingency planning for departure on WTO terms are essential in case EU intransigence continues. Will the Prime Minister confirm that all of those necessary actions are now being taken to see us through any short-term disruption, including action to prepare for extra checks at the border, diversion of flow to friendlier ports, liberalisation of tariff schedules and cutting taxes for businesses?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is trying to tempt me into some budgetary decisions there, which, as he will know, would not be appropriate at the Dispatch Box. But I would say to him that we are making the plans—the contingency arrangements—for no deal. As I said in my statement, the Cabinet will be meeting tomorrow to discuss what further steps need to be taken. We have already stepped up those preparations—indeed, my right hon. Friend was responsible for them himself when he was the Brexit Secretary of State—but further stepping up of the no-deal preparations has gone on to address exactly the sorts of issues he is looking at, such as the flow of traffic into different ports here in the UK to ease the disruption. Disruption will take place under no deal in the short term. We want to take every step we can to mitigate that.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Prime Minister ruled out a customs union, ruled out Norway, ruled out Canada, ruled out parliamentary votes on her objectives, ruled out parliamentary votes on the options and is now ruling out extending article 50, yet everyone knows she does not have support for her plan and she has no assurances from the EU that she asked for. If she carries on like this, she is the one who will take us over a no-deal cliff edge.

This Christmas, businesses and Departments across the country are now going to be spending billions of pounds preparing for no deal. Does she not have a duty and a responsibility to them to rule out no deal, to say she will extend article 50 and to have a proper discussion in Parliament to work out the way forward?

The Prime Minister: First, the right hon. Lady says that we ruled out certain things. Actually, in the vote that took place in 2016, the majority of the British people voted to leave the European Union, and one of the key issues in that was bringing an end to free movement, which some of the suggestions that she has as alternatives would not allow to happen. So, actually, we are trying to reflect the views that took place during that vote, and the decision as to whether or not we go forward with the deal will be one that this Parliament will take.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): My right hon. Friend continues to negotiate changes to the backstop. Does she not agree that if those efforts were, unfortunately, to fail and if we are to avoid leaving without a deal, which we must at all costs avoid, it must now be critical that we build consensus in this House and forge a compromise that delivers Brexit while protecting British jobs and interests?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my right hon. Friend that the aim of everything we are doing, and I believe the aim of what this House will do, should be to ensure that we deliver on that vote and do it in a way that protects jobs and prosperity for people up and down this country. That is exactly what we are working for, and I hope that every Member of this House will consider that when it comes to looking at whether or not we should support this deal. I believe we should because it does exactly what my right hon. Friend has suggested.

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): Let me tell the Prime Minister what is irresponsible: delaying a vote on her agreement not because she is going to get any changes to it, but because she wants to run down the clock and try to intimidate MPs into supporting it to avoid no deal. Is it not the reality that this is not acting in the national interest, but in her personal interest, and that neither her party nor the country will forgive her for it?

The Prime Minister: I believe it would not have been right if I had not listened to the concerns expressed in the House. I listened to those concerns and I am working—discussions are continuing—with the European Union in relation to how we address them. It will then be for Parliament to decide but, at that point, Parliament and Members of the House will have a responsibility. The decision they come to will be about whether or not to deliver on the vote of the referendum in a way that protects jobs and our security.

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): Given that the Prime Minister has listened and is still trying to improve the deal, would the deal be more palatable if the timetable
for starting on and agreeing the terms of future trade were as firm and as legally binding as the timetable for paying over all the billions?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. From the Council conclusions, there has been further progress in relation to the EU’s commitment to starting the next stage of negotiations, but it is important for us to continue to discuss the issue he raises about getting that confirmation and certainty—he refers to legal certainty—as to when those negotiations can start, and when it is the determination of both parties to ensure that those negotiations end. We want that trade deal in place by the end of December 2020.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): The Prime Minister has said for two years that no deal is better than a bad deal, but we now know why—her deal is a disaster and will never pass the House. As she desperately tries to let the clock tick down, will she publish her no-deal planning?

The Prime Minister: I have been and remain clear that no deal is better than a bad deal, but I believe this is a good deal.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Will the Prime Minister publish the tariff schedule for the UK for a World Trade Organisation exit? Will that include zero tariffs on all components coming in for manufacturing to provide yet another great boost to Britain as a big manufacturing centre?

The Prime Minister: These issues would have to be addressed in relation to a no-deal scenario. The Government continue to discuss the plans we need to put in place to deal with the possibility of no deal in order to mitigate the disruption that would occur in that situation. Obviously, we will be looking closely at the tariff schedules.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): How much will it cost the NHS, our other public services and thousands of businesses up and down the country as they are forced to activate their no-deal contingency plans because of the Prime Minister’s reckless time wasting?

The Prime Minister: Responsible government is about ensuring that contingency arrangements are put in place. That is the responsible thing that any Government in this situation would do—ensure that contingency arrangements are in place until we have the outcome and know with certainty whether we are leaving with a deal or no deal. We need to make those contingency arrangements. That is the right thing to do.

Ms Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): After tomorrow’s Cabinet meeting when no-deal preparations will be high on the agenda, will the Prime Minister please arrange for a Minister to come to the House to give a statement—this week and every week until we leave the EU—so that we know what is happening and so that the country, businesses and individuals can be reassured? It is vital that the preparations happen, and this House needs to know what is happening.

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend raises the important point of making planning information available to the House. There are a number of ways in which that is expressed to the House. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union appears before the Select Committee and responds on those issues, and these matters have been addressed in debates in the House, but I understand the point she makes about wanting to ensure that Members are aware of the arrangements that have been put in place.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Does the Prime Minister accept that this House needs more time not to debate but to vote on the various options before it? Might she not therefore agree that we vote as soon as possible on the amendments that the Speaker will choose of those tabled? If she is unwilling to do that, might the Opposition parties think how they can use the time they have to debate on the Floor of the House to bring forward that vote? If Members agree with that line of action, might they sign the motion on the Order Paper in my name?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. Obviously, the intention is to have a proper number of days for debate when the vote is brought back in January. At that stage, how the matter is put before the House will depend on the further discussions that have taken place with the European Union. As we have always said, any motion on this issue is of course amendable by Members of the House.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): We are told that the United Kingdom does not want the backstop. We are told that the European Union does not want to enter the backstop. What on earth is stopping the European Union giving us a legal guarantee that such a backstop would last only for a very short time?

The Prime Minister: It is exactly that further political and legal assurance that we are looking at. There have been very clear statements from the European Union. Those have been reiterated not only in the Council conclusions but after the Council conclusions as well. The best way to stop the backstop coming into place is of course to have a firm date for introducing the future relationship. That is currently the intention and that is currently 31 December 2020. We will continue to discuss what further assurances we can get on this point.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): When precisely will the Prime Minister be securing this “Miracle on 34th Street” guarantee from the European Union on the backstop that she will come back with before 7 January? If she does come back with it, will the House be debating it on a fresh Government motion? On her commitment to come back on 7 January to start the debate, is that a promise?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the business motion and the way in which the debate is to be dealt with by the House will of course be discussed through the usual channels. I said we would be starting the debate in the first week, with a vote in the following week. The hon. Gentleman asked me about the timetable. Discussions are continuing with the European Union and I expect them to continue into the new year.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Here is what would do irreparable damage to the integrity of our politics: to run down the clock and end up forcing
through a deal that 48% did not want because they did not want to leave the European Union, and that the majority of those who voted for Brexit do not want. The mathematics simply do not stack up. The majority, in this House and in the wider country, do not want this deal. Can I ask the Prime Minister to get on with it, so that we can vote on it and then look at practical alternatives?

The Prime Minister: As I indicated in my statement, we will bring the vote back in the second week in January. It is our intention that the debate will start in the previous week, the first week of January. As I said earlier, I have listened to the House. Had I not listened to the House and started the work to try to get further assurances, I suspect hon. Members would have raised that issue. It is right that I and the Government are doing exactly what we said we would, which is work with the EU for those further political and legal assurances.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): We now know what the plan is. Having failed to win support for the deal in Parliament and having failed to get any meaningful change to it at the EU Council last week, the Prime Minister now simply wants to run down the clock and intimidate Parliament into choosing between a bad deal and the disaster of no deal. I put it to the Prime Minister that it is wrong to threaten and intimidate Parliament in this way. More importantly, it is reckless to take options off the table, as she has tried to do today, that could prevent the disaster of no deal for the country.

The Prime Minister: Whatever the point at which this House faced the meaningful vote, it will be a decision for Members of this House as to whether to accept the deal or—[Interruption.] There are some who would prefer to see action taken so that we do not leave the European Union—I think that would be wrong. What I believe is right is that we deliver on the referendum. The very clear message that comes back from the European Union—from the Commission and EU leaders—is that they do want a deal. We have obviously negotiated this deal. There are those further assurances that I am working to achieve, and it has been made clear by President Juncker and others that those further discussions can indeed take place.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The Prime Minister knows that no better deal will be found in Europe and that no majority will be found in Westminster. She also knows that no deal is disastrous. She delayed a vote because she knew her deal would fail to get the support that it needed. She can employ the same logic again. Will she confirm that she holds the power to seek an extension for article 50?

The Prime Minister: First of all, the Government hold the power to seek an extension for article 50; and any extension of article 50 would have to be agreed with the European Union, but I have been clear that what I believe is the right course of action, having triggered article 50 and having undertaken the negotiations, is that we ensure that we leave the European Union on the timetable that we have already set out.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The Prime Minister in her statement talked about empowering this House. The trouble is that she is asking the House to accept a deferral for several weeks of the meaningful vote on the draft withdrawal agreement, on the basis that further assurances can be agreed with the European Union, but there is nothing in what she has said today or in what has been reported from the EU Council to suggest that those further assurances are likely to be given. I say this as somebody who was going to vote for her draft agreement on the basis that she set out—that businesses need certainty and the country needs reassurance. I honestly do not think that businesses, employers and our constituents will understand why this House is going on holiday for two weeks when we should be having the meaningful vote this week.

The Prime Minister: What I believe is right is that, having heard the concerns that have been expressed by Members of this House, the Government are taking those concerns to the European Union. Yes, we have further statements from the EU with legal status in the Council conclusions than we have had before, but we are seeking yet more and further assurances from the European Union. I think that is the right thing to do, then that can be debated properly by this House and the vote taken.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Last Thursday, the Attorney General told the House that he was reviewing the question of whether article 50 could be revoked by a simple vote of this House or by legislation. This Thursday, the Scottish case is being referred back from the European Court of Justice to the court in Edinburgh to look at this issue. Can the Prime Minister confirm for us that the Government’s position on how article 50 could be revoked—whether through legislation or whether simply a vote of this House is required—will be set out to the court in Edinburgh on Thursday?
The Prime Minister: I will certainly look into that issue and get back to the hon. and learned Lady about the specifics in terms of the Government’s stance on the case that is going to the court in Edinburgh. I know that she has taken a considerable interest in revoking article 50. I simply remind all Members that the Government have said that we will not revoke article 50, because it means staying in the European Union.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): I am one of the Members who would have and will support the Prime Minister’s deal, but I have to say that what is coming back to me from business, industry and the City is that we are haemorrhaging support and investment on a daily basis and it is getting worse. That is why I joined hon. Members in saying, please think again about holding the vote and about considering a series of stand-alone resolutions, which mean that we can take a view and move on.

The Prime Minister: I understand the concern that my hon. Friend expresses about business. Business wants certainty. Business wants the deal. Business welcomed the deal when we negotiated it and I think that it still takes that approach. My hon. Friend referred to what have been called indicative votes—a number of motions that could be brought before the House. I have no plans for indicative votes. I say to him and other Members that it is necessary for the House to reflect on what Members want in terms of their responsibility to come to a decision on this matter. At the moment, there are a number of views in the House; some want to stay in the EU, some want to go for a second referendum, some would support no deal and some would support looking at other arrangements. As I said, any of those arrangements would require a withdrawal agreement, because they would require us to make clear the basis on which we are withdrawing from the European Union.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Last week, the Prime Minister admonished Jean-Claude Juncker for his use of the word “nebulous”. Many Members would take issue with her use of the word “meaningful” because there is nothing meaningful about a vote that forces Members to choose between her deal and no deal. When will the Prime Minister stop digging, start listening and build a consensus with Members across the House to get us out of this mess?

The Prime Minister: It was always going to be the case, whenever the vote came before the House, that Members would have a decision on whether to support the deal that had been negotiated with the European Union, with the consequences that failure to support it would bring. That is the same whenever that vote is taken.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Prime Minister recall telling the House on 3 December that the £3 billion to £4 billion set aside in the Budget for contingency no-deal planning was about to be allocated in the next few days to relevant Departments? Has that allocation has been made and is the money now available for essential contingency planning?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do recall saying that. Of course, the 2018-19 financial year allocations are in place and money is being spent. I think my right hon. Friend was referring to—and I was referring to—the 2019-20 allocations. Negotiations on those are well advanced, several Departments have settled and we expect to be in a position to confirm all those shortly.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Last Friday, a constituent said to me that although she had voted to leave in the referendum in 2016, she now wanted to register the fact that she had changed her mind, as she put it, for the sake of her grandchildren. If it emerges that a significant number of previous leave voters have reached the same conclusion, what would be more democratic: allowing them the opportunity to change their mind, or pressing on regardless?

The Prime Minister: I also hear from people who are in the opposite position: they voted to remain and now say that they would vote to leave the European Union. If there were a second referendum, which had the same result, would those hon. Members who wish people to be given the chance to think again continue to say that there should be a referendum? If there were a different result, I think many people would ask, “How many referendums shall we have?” We had the referendum and I believe that it is our duty to deliver on it.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): The problem is that there is a consensus in the country, and that consensus is that this is one unholly mess and a solution must be found. The Prime Minister has still not told us what her plan B is. Does she not understand that, if we left the European Union without a people’s vote, knowing what Brexit looked like, and then it turned out that the people of this country, knowing what Brexit looked like, did not want us to leave the European Union, it would be the biggest betrayal of democracy in this country, and the people of this country, especially the young people, would never forget or forgive us—or especially our party?

The Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend has taken a particular view in relation to this issue, but I continue to believe that what we should be doing is delivering on the vote. As I said when I gave the figures in my statement, it was the overwhelming view of this Parliament that the people should have a vote in the referendum, and it was the overwhelming view of this Parliament that article 50 should be triggered. Article 50 leads to our leaving the European Union, and it is now our duty to deliver that.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): How does the Prime Minister have the gall to accuse those of us who want more democracy of breaking faith with the public, when she herself has turned faith breaking into a new art form? She promised no general election last year, and then granted one. She promised a meaningful vote last week, and then cancelled it. But one cannot break faith with the British public by asking for their views. Why can the Prime Minister not understand that a people’s vote would be the first opportunity for people to vote on the facts, not on the fantasy and the fabrication?

The Prime Minister: Many people up and down the country—17.4 million people, I think—would say that, if the vote that took place in 2016 were not honoured by this Parliament, that would be breaking faith.
Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): As my right hon. Friend has said, the outcome is that we leave without an agreement to leave, a transition and future arrangements, or we somehow return to the attempt by some to reverse the result of the referendum—or we have the deal with the agreements that are being negotiated now. In an article published in *The Times* on Thursday, Freddie Sayers made it clear that seven people out of eight in the country—and, I suspect, here as well—would rather have the deal with the agreements than drop out without a deal or have another referendum. So I can say to the Prime Minister that I think most people support her, and we should too.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. What he has said reflects comments from around the country: people say or write to me that they want us to get on with it, to deliver and then to be able—as a Government and as a Parliament—to get on with addressing the domestic issues that matter to them day to day.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Let us be clear: it is the long list of broken promises of leave campaigners whom the Prime Minister appointed to her Government that has done irreparable damage to the integrity of our politics. She has made three statements in the House, and on each occasion the House has made clear that it will not vote for her plan, but she continues to refuse to listen. May I ask her a specific question? She has said that no deal is not something that she would countenance. Let us suppose that we reach the March 2019 European Council and there is no consensus in the House on a temporary. So I say to the Prime Minister—keep calm and carry on.

The Prime Minister: I have indicated my approach in relation to the extension of article 50.

Greg Hands (Chelsea and Fulham) (Con): Notwithstanding what Emmanuel Macron said on Friday, recent comments from the European Commission have been rather more hostile, and anything but nebulous. Martin Selmayr is reported to have told officials that losing Northern Ireland was the price of Brexit. Briefing EU ambassadors on the deal, Sabine Weyand said that the UK “must align their rules but the EU will retain all the controls.” At the weekend, a further EU official was reported in *The Times* to have said:

“To use a Christmas theme, we want all parties and factions in the British parliament to feel the bleak midwinter.”

Does that sound to my right hon. Friend like people negotiating in good faith?

The Prime Minister: I have always been clear throughout this that these have been tough negotiations, but we have held our side and achieved a deal that delivers on the vote of the British people, and delivers it in a way that protects jobs and security, and, I believe, protects our prosperity for the future.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Is it not the truth that, while the Prime Minister talks about democracy, she prevented the Cabinet from having a vote, she is preventing Parliament from having a vote and she does not want the public to have a vote on this deal? If she wants to talk about democracy, she should think very carefully about that. Will she not admit that she is acting in a completely reckless fashion with jobs, with business, with investment and with our constituents’ futures, because on 2 January, when the vast majority of people in this country will go back to work, this Parliament will not be sitting, the Government will still be stalling for time and trying to come up with a magic solution and people will simply be asking, “What is going on?”

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman asked me a question in relation to what I was doing and I have to say that my answer to that question is no.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): We have had our people’s vote in Lincolnshire—and they are people, by the way. May I express an unashamedly supportive view of the Prime Minister today? I think that this matter is resolvable, and many of us who have been sceptical about the deal so far could be persuaded to vote for it if there were a legally binding protocol saying that, as is normal with international treaties, if a temporary arrangement ceases to be temporary, then either side can unilaterally withdraw, and in any event under international law we would have the right to abrogate those parts of the treaty if they prove not to be temporary. So I say to the Prime Minister—keep calm and carry on.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and I think that the amendment he has tabled to the motion reflects the view he has just expressed. There are many ways in which we can achieve what everybody, I think, who is concerned about the backstop wants, which is to make sure that if it is used it is only temporary. I want to try to make sure it is not used at all.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Prime Minister aware that many people in our country feel that they were conned over the last referendum by a combination of fraudsters, cheats, foreign money and dissembling about the real truth of the challenges our country faces? Does she also know that many of us feel it is tragic to see her so isolated—isolated from her party, from this Parliament and from the people in the country? Will she change her mind, as I have done, and go for a people’s vote and a people’s choice on the facts, not on the theory?

The Prime Minister: No, I have already made my views clear. I mentioned them in my statement in relation to the concept of a second referendum. I think that we should be delivering on the referendum that took place in 2016.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend has said that she is going to be stepping up work to mitigate any disruption in the event of a no deal and the Cabinet will be discussing that tomorrow. Given that there are just over 100 days to go and we have the Christmas and new year break, can she inform this House and the watching country how many COBRA meetings there will be, how many she will chair, and
whether there will be meetings throughout the Christmas and new year break of Cabinet Ministers and COBRA to plan for this?

The Prime Minister: There have already been fortnightly meetings taking place, and that will move to a more regular rhythm in January as we continue to step up the preparations for no deal.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): May I welcome the Prime Minister ruling out a second referendum when we have not actually implemented the first, and may I also congratulate her—she did not get her hair ruffled by President Juncker in the way he seems to do to everybody? However, has she had a word with the Chancellor of the Exchequer? He implied the people who voted leave—17.4 million people—were extremists. Has she had a word with him to make sure that he is not going to take that attitude to decent people across the country?

The Prime Minister: Everybody in this Government recognises that this Parliament gave people the decision on whether or not to leave. People went out and 17.4 million people chose that we should leave the European Union. They did so for a variety of reasons—ending free movement was a reason for many of them, but for many of them a reason was also the concept of wanting a United Kingdom able to stand independent in the world, to make those trade deals around the rest of the world, but to be free of the bureaucracy of Brussels; that was another reason people voted to leave. They did that with their hearts and with their heads and with the best of intentions, and it is our job to deliver on the vote they gave.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): By your leave, Mr Speaker, may I congratulate the Prime Minister on winning the confidence of the Conservaties in this House last week and assure her that she therefore commands my confidence, too? On the issue of the second referendum—better known as the losers’ vote—I support the Prime Minister’s opposition to this not only because it is undemocratic and would be divisive but because it would be very hard to deny a second referendum in Scotland if we had a second referendum on membership of the European Union.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We have a record on a number of referendums over the years. We have accepted the decisions that people have taken and we have not gone back to them with a second referendum. He is absolutely right, and I also thank him for his remarks at the beginning of his question.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): We have been told that there is going to be a 34-day delay, from when we were supposed to have the meaningful vote last Tuesday until the new date of 14 January. There are clearly not going to be any substantive changes to the withdrawal agreement, and we all know what the outcome of the vote will be, so it is irresponsible of the Prime Minister to prolong this uncertainty while not ruling out a no-deal Brexit. Further to the question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), I want to ask her again: what is the cost to our country of pressing the button on the no-deal contingency plans, which we know that many businesses and public services across the country, including our NHS, will now have to trigger before Christmas?

The Prime Minister: I will give the hon. Lady the same answer that I gave to the right hon. Member for Exeter, which is that these are plans that it is sensible for the Government to make as contingency arrangements in the circumstances that we have. If she and other Members wish to ensure that we do not leave the European Union without a deal, the only way to do that is to support a deal.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Twenty-seven Prime Ministers across Europe have agreed unanimously to offer the UK the deepest trade agreement they have ever offered. Five of those Prime Ministers are from sister parties of the British Labour party and seven are from sister parties of the British Liberal Democrat party. Does our Prime Minister agree that the best way for our Opposition parties to avoid a hard Brexit is to look again at the deal that is being offered by Prime Ministers across Europe?

The Prime Minister: I echo my hon. Friend’s comments; she is absolutely right. I understand that those sister parties have been talking to the parties on our Opposition Benches and encouraging them to see that this deal delivers a far wider and more ambitious trading arrangement than has ever been offered to any other third country.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): For weeks now, the Prime Minister has been clear about what her deal is. For weeks now, the European Union has been clear about what deal it will offer. For weeks now, this House has been clear about what it will reject. However, it is not true that nothing has changed, because it is clear that what little support the Prime Minister had left on her own Benches is now ebbing away by the hour—[Interruption.] Well, cheer if you want, gentlemen, but it is not happening, is it? We know that the quicker we take the deal, the longer we will have to prepare for whatever the outcome of that vote is. The British public will not forgive any of us for going away on holiday without having made any progress on this. For goodness sake, Prime Minister, stop wasting our time! Get on and table that vote, and let us prepare for what comes next.

The Prime Minister: It is not correct to say that no progress has been made, but I want to see further progress being made and that is what I am going to be working on.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): The draft withdrawal agreement is 585 pages long, and while I appreciate, although do not necessary agree with, the case for not producing a full plan for a managed no-deal Brexit, if the withdrawal agreement fails and is rejected in this House, how quickly will the full no-deal preparation be published?

The Prime Minister: As I am sure my hon. Friend will recall, the formal position is that if the deal is rejected, the Government could have a limited number of sitting days in which to bring forward proposals for the next stage and for dealing with that situation, and that is the timetable that we would obviously meet.
Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is interesting that the one passage leaked to the press yesterday of the Prime Minister’s lengthy statement today was her antagonism towards the idea of a people’s vote. It is entirely consistent with her approach to this process that she took this House to the Supreme Court to stop us having a say at the beginning and then withdrew the vote last week at the end. If she is going to pause, stop and prevaricate in the next few weeks, I beg her to use that time to start listening to and engaging with people in this House and the anxieties that are felt out there by the public. For the very first time, will she engage and listen?

The Prime Minister: I have made the point about listening to the House, which is why further discussions are taking place, and as I said in my statement, I am of course happy to speak with people in this House. I have been speaking with quite a few of my colleagues over the past couple of weeks, and I am happy to continue to speak with colleagues about how we can ensure that we deliver on the vote and that we deliver a good Brexit.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Should the Prime Minister’s recent experiences at the EU Council not serve as a powerful corrective to any illusion that we could have remained a member of it?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an interesting point. I suspect that what he saw actually fed into the concerns that many of the 17.4 million people had when they voted to leave.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This afternoon, on a cross-party basis, 60 Members of Parliament wrote to the Prime Minister asking her to rule out no deal. She knows the costs. What possible reason can she have for not doing that now?

The Prime Minister: The only way to rule out no deal is to agree to a deal.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): The Prime Minister is right to seek further assurances on the backstop, which, after all, is what many right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House asked her to do. Is it not the case that most hon. Members who now support a second referendum, most of whom voted to trigger article 50, are doing so working on the heroic assumption that remain is likely to win? Have they stopped for one second to consider the possibility that leave might win or, worst of all, that we would have another very narrow result that would cause uncertainty in this country in the months and years ahead?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend makes an important point about the uncertainty that would come to this country. As I have said before, a second referendum would be divisive; it would not necessarily be decisive. However, many people who assume that it would result in a remain decision actually underestimate the character of the British people, and the view of many people would be, “We gave a very clear message; we wanted to leave; and we’ll vote in even greater numbers to do so.”

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Prime Minister not realise that the reason why the EU is clinging limpet-like to this agreement is that it knows that there are concessions within that will enable it, when it comes to the future trade arrangements, to extract even more concessions from the UK Government? Would it not be far better to walk away now with £39 billion in her pocket and with her hands free and able to do the kind of work that any Government should want to do to make this country prosperous?

The Prime Minister: Of course, it has been made clear to the Government that it is not the case that we would not have any financial liabilities in a no-deal circumstance. There would be some financial liabilities for this Government. Of course, the £39 billion is the negotiated settlement in relation to the withdrawal agreement, but there would be financial liabilities even in a no-deal situation.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): It is not just the backstop that worries colleagues, myself included; for me, it is the lack of legal certainty over what our future trade deals might look like. The political declaration is not legally binding, so any EU country leader, including our own should we have a different leader, could rip it up and we could spiral to a no-deal Brexit at any time. The Prime Minister has said it is not about our view, and I agree with her. That is why she has appealed to the country directly with her deal, and it is why I must represent my constituents. If she really believes in the views of constituents being the most important thing, surely the right thing to do—dare I say the democratic thing to do—is to be honest and grown up by displaying proper engagement with the people, which means checking with them that they are content with her deal.

The Prime Minister: The arguments my hon. Friend puts about listening to people could equally be put about listening to people in relation to the first referendum held in 2016. She raises an important point about the nature of the political declaration, and that concern is another issue that I have been raising with the European Union, because I want to ensure that right hon. and hon. Members are able to have full confidence in that future trade agreement.

Angus Brendan MacNeill (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The Prime Minister made a deal with the EU on Ireland, and Ireland is right to keep her in a cage of her own making to make sure that the UK cannot backslide on its commitments. Last week, the EU27 will have noticed the sleekit way her Government changed the laws and moved the goalposts when dealing with Scotland in the Supreme Court. The reality is that, where once Britannia said it ruled the waves, now the EU’s big fear, as we have seen with Scotland, is that, when given the chance, Britannia will waive the rules and will be away on holiday before voting on any deal.

The Prime Minister: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the Bill that the Scottish Parliament brought forward that challenged the changes made in relation to the withdrawal Act. On the relationship between the withdrawal Act and the decisions of the Scottish Parliament in relation to Scotland, SNP Members and, indeed, the Scottish Government were aware of the position when they brought that Bill before the Scottish Parliament.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Despite assurances from the Prime Minister that the backstop would be temporary, I remain very concerned
that if this House approves the deeply flawed withdrawal agreement, we risk being trapped in the backstop indefinitely. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that agreement, we risk being trapped in the backstop that if this House approves the deeply flawed withdrawal agreement, we risk being trapped in the backstop that we leave the European Union with a deal.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Several members of the Prime Minister’s Cabinet said this weekend that, if her deal is voted down, it should be for Parliament to decide what happens next. Does she agree?

The Prime Minister: There is a process set out in the legislation. If the deal is voted down, it is for the Government, within a certain period of time, to bring forward their proposals to Parliament. A motion will be tabled before Parliament and, following the amendment agreed by Parliament a couple of weeks ago, the motion will be amendable.

Dr Phillip Lee (Bracknell) (Con): Judging by the tone and content of today’s statement, it would appear that the Prime Minister is still implacably opposed to what I think is the only democratic solution to this impasse. For the sake of clarity, will she confirm that she is so opposed that she would prefer no deal?

The Prime Minister: What I want to see happening, and what I prefer, is for us to leave the European Union on the basis of a good deal, and I believe this is a good deal.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition know there is no point in kicking this can down the road—nothing is going to happen over Christmas and the new year. May I ask the Prime Minister to bring forward her meaningful vote this week and the Leader of the Opposition to bring forward his motion of no confidence this week, and then this week we can move on to where we know we are going, which is a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: No, there are further discussions with the EU and those will continue into the new year.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I want to commend the Prime Minister’s dogged determination, and so many people on the streets of my constituency this weekend commended her for her attitude. Does she agree that given that this is the only deal on the table, everything must be done to make it acceptable, which means everybody pulling together for the sake of the nation and, in particular, for the sake of our younger generations, who do not seem to be mentioned enough? That was reiterated to me at University Centre Somerset just this weekend, because we do have to leave them with an economy that is fully functioning and viable.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to ensure that we are protecting the economy for the future, and that is what this deal does.

Those young people at University Centre Somerset would want to see not just a Government but an Opposition putting their interests and the national interest first, rather than the Opposition putting their party interests first.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): The past few weeks have shown that this deal is going nowhere, and today’s statement does not change that. Does the Prime Minister now regret not working cross-party to build a consensus in this House? Why will she not accept that there is a way out of this hopeless situation by extending article 50 and working together, without the political posturing, for a deal that works for everyone?

The Prime Minister: We have negotiated a deal that works for everyone. I say to the hon. Lady simply this: in June 2016, a vote was held and people voted to leave the European Union. On 29 March 2019, the date set for us to leave the EU, it will be nearly three years since that vote. I think people want us to get on with leaving the EU, and that is what we will do.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does the Prime Minister realise that when Jean-Claude Juncker called her “nebulous” he fundamentally underestimated the attitude of the British people, who completely disagree with that sentiment? That is what I found in my constituency this weekend, where people praised the Prime Minister’s determination to get a deal that works for my constituency. Can she display that similar determination in ruling out a second referendum, which would be so insulting to my constituents and suggest that they do not know what they voted for the first time round?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Many people who voted to leave in the referendum in 2016 would say exactly that: they knew what they were voting for; they voted for what they believed was right for this country; and they want a Government who deliver that.

Phil Wilson (Sedgefield) (Lab): I have asked the Prime Minister before whether her deal is better than the one we have now and she cannot give a straight answer, because I think she knows the answer is no. What undermines the integrity of our democracy, Prime Minister, is to ask—eventually—Members of this House to knowingly vote for something that will make their constituents poorer; it is not those in this House who want the people to have the final say on whether they actually wanted that to happen in the first place. Prime Minister, is your deal better than the one we have now? If it is, can we have the vote on the meaningful vote this week?

The Prime Minister: I have set out when the meaningful vote will take place. The hon. Gentleman again referenced people being poorer under this deal than they are today. They are not going to be poorer under this deal than they are today. The economic analysis is very clear about this, and it is clear that the best deal—the best approach that delivers on the referendum and protects jobs and the economy—is the deal.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): A number of Opposition Members and, indeed, some Government Members have been talking about people who have changed their minds and how important it is that we
respect people’s opportunity to change their minds. Does the Prime Minister agree that although there is no evidence to show that a meaningful number of people have changed their mind in respect of the referendum result, it is clear that a number of Opposition Members have changed their minds, because previously they said they would respect the outcome of the referendum and they clearly now no longer wish to do so? If they want to stop Brexit, they should be honest with this House and their constituents and just say so.

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is the case that both the Conservative party and the Labour party campaigned in last year’s election on the basis that we would respect the referendum and the Labour party campaigned in last year’s election to reflect that position as well, to reflect on the basis that we would respect the referendum and the Labour party campaigned in last year’s election on the basis that we would respect the referendum and deliver on its result. I believe that is important, and the Opposition should take that position as well, to reflect their manifesto and the promise that they made to the British people.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Given that the Conservatives have had the opportunity to decide on the Prime Minister’s own position twice in the past two years, in what way is it undemocratic to give the people a second vote on Brexit?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we recognise when we have a referendum in this country that we do not say to people, “Well, if it comes out with the result that most people in Parliament want, we will accept it, and if not, we won’t.” We accept the results of referendums in this country. Given that the majority of Members of this House stood last year on manifestos that said they would respect the result of the referendum, we should do that.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The certainty of World Trade Organisation terms from 29 March, without even including the opportunity for tariff-free trade under article 24 of the general agreement on tariffs and trade and the immediate opportunity to negotiate and conclude free trade agreements with the EU and the rest of the world, hardly sounds like an outcome to be avoided at all costs, and certainly not like a disaster. The extent of any disruption from a move to WTO terms depends on the policies of our European Union partners. If it becomes clear on Wednesday that their preparations appear to make transition more difficult, not easier, will the Prime Minister make sure that of the £39 billion that we would otherwise pay to the EU, the first charge is for British businesses affected by their policies? Will she show the first flash of steel by making it clear that she will at least consider that the £1.2 billion of sunk costs in the Galileo project might also come into consideration?

The Prime Minister: The work on the financial settlement that led to the £34 billion to £39 billion—significantly less than the £100 billion that was being talked about at European Union level at one stage—did of course take into account all the aspects of the contributions that the United Kingdom has made into the European Union over the number of years of our membership. As a result of the tough negotiations that the UK undertook, we have seen a significantly smaller sum of money than the one that the European Union initially thought of.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): On Friday, I visited the Newcastle West End food bank to drop off a Christmas donation. The food bank is now distributing around 11 tonnes of food a month to people in crisis, half of whom are children. The Prime Minister’s own Government’s analysis shows that we will be worse off under every Brexit scenario, but particularly if we leave without an agreement. Her no-deal threat makes no sense. She will not give the details or the economic analysis of the costs, so will she just take that threat off the table and give the reassurance that this Government—her Government—will not let the poorest in society pay for this Brexit impasse?

The Prime Minister: When looking at the negotiations for this deal, we wanted to ensure that we could protect jobs and that we would protect our prosperity for the future, and that is exactly what we have done. I repeat what I have said to other hon. Members: it is not possible simply to wish away no deal without having an alternative to no deal. That means either having a deal or not having Brexit at all. I believe that delivering on Brexit is what we should be doing and what this House should be agreeing.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I urge the Government to get off their knees in these negotiations. Will the Prime Minister remind the EU, this House, and perhaps even the Cabinet that we are the United Kingdom, and that we are perfectly capable of standing alone? We are not some kind of small, third-world backwater that is dependent on the benevolence of the European Union. The way that the EU has treated the Prime Minister in these negotiations is embarrassing for her and humiliating for the United Kingdom. If she were to go along to the EU now and tell it, in the face of its intransigence, to get stuffed, the huge proportion of the British people would be absolutely right behind her. In this great battle between Parliament and the people, it is critical that the Prime Minister is on the side of the people.

The Prime Minister: I say to my hon. Friend that being on the side of the people is about ensuring that this Government deliver on Brexit, and that is what we will do.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): At the weekend, it was reported that the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, had been taken on board as a backseat driver of this process. I have to say that, given that he was the original architect of this mess, I was slightly concerned about that. What exactly is the former Prime Minister’s role in this, when exactly was the last time she spoke to him and what advice is he giving her?

The Prime Minister: The former Prime Minister is not giving advice. The last time I spoke to him was when we agreed the withdrawal agreement. It was when I spoke to two former Prime Ministers, as a matter of courtesy, to inform them what had been negotiated with the European Union.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I welcome the guarantees that the Prime Minister has given today about having no second referendum of any kind. I also welcome her standing up to Mr Juncker. May I just say in plain words that she should go to the European Union and
say, “You can stick the £39 billion of taxpayers’ money where the sun don’t shine unless we get legal movement on the backstop.” She would not be called nebulous then; she would be called the iron lady.

The Prime Minister: As I have said to other Members of this House, it is important for us to remember that, whatever the circumstances of our leaving the European Union, there would be some financial obligations for us. As a country that does meet its legal obligations, it is important for us to continue to do so.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): The trouble is that all the time in the world will not make the slightest difference to the arithmetic in this House. The truth is that by delaying holding the meaningful vote by another 28 days from today, the Prime Minister is playing into the hands of the European Union, she is playing into the hands of those who want to undermine our security, she is playing into the hands of those who want to be our economic rivals and she is achieving absolutely nothing for this country. She could invite every single Member of the House round to her gaff for Christmas day, Boxing day and new year’s eve and she would still lose the vote, so why does she not get on with it this week?

The Prime Minister: It is because I am seeking those further assurances from the European Union. I have listened to the House and that is what I am doing.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I very much hope that the Prime Minister can agree with the EU a legally binding annex to the withdrawal agreement on any intended use of the backstop as that could unite many Members of this House. Given that they too, like us, were elected on a manifesto of respecting the referendum result, should not any further reassurances be the moment for Labour Members to join us in supporting a practical compromise and in ending uncertainty?

The Prime Minister: I agree that it is important that, when it comes to the vote, Members from across this whole House should put the interests of this country first—the interests of delivering on the referendum and doing it in a way that does protect jobs and our security, which is exactly what this deal does.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Prime Minister, some of your junior Ministers—those on the payroll—have told other MPs that the backstop cannot be changed and that, if it were to be changed, Leo Varadkar would lose the Republic of Ireland election. We do need to have good relations with the Republic of Ireland, but, Prime Minister, you are the Prime Minister and all your responsibilities lie with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Will the Prime Minister remind the members of her payroll team that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and that there is no onus on any Member, or junior Minister, to be a cheerleader for the Taoiseach?

The Prime Minister: The reasons why we have negotiated what we have and why, as a Government, we are committed to Northern Ireland and to not having a hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland have nothing to do with the views of the Taoiseach or of the Government of the Republic of Ireland. It is about the commitment that we believe that we should be giving to the people of Northern Ireland.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): If the UK sensibly and pragmatically continues to apply the Union customs code after Brexit, given that from the beginning of the new year we will have the new UK customs declaration service and the registered exporter system, which will replace certificates of origin, is it not the case that the European Union would not be acting in good faith if it insisted on its backstop, potentially out to 2099, as is cited in the withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister: I will be very clear with my hon. Friend that the backstop is, as is said in the withdrawal agreement and as was confirmed by the Council conclusions last week, intended to be temporary. Of course, article 50 does not allow for a permanent arrangement to be put in place. The existence of alternative arrangements that would enable us to provide that there is no hard border between Northern Ireland and Ireland would ensure either that the backstop need not be used or, if it was used, that it could be replaced quickly by those arrangements.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): What advice does the Prime Minister have for my constituent who is stockpiling insulin? Does she believe that urgent measures need to be put in place for such vital provisions?

The Prime Minister: The Department of Health is, of course, making contingency arrangements for no deal. That is part of the preparations that are taking place, and it is entirely right for the Government to do that.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Co-op): Securing the rights of British nationals living in the EU27 and the rights of EU nationals here in the United Kingdom is of the utmost importance for every Member of this House. In the absence of any alternative legal document, will the Prime Minister confirm that only her deal absolutely guarantees in law the rights of fellow Brits in the EU and EU nationals here?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am very happy to give that confirmation to my hon. Friend. He is right to raise this issue. It was an issue in the early stages of the negotiations, when many Members of this House raised the question of citizens’ rights. Now we hear a lot about the backstop, but people omit to mention that the crucial issue of citizens’ rights is reflected in the protections and guarantees in the withdrawal agreement.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The Prime Minister continues to put on the pretence that somehow when the people voted, they gave permission only for her deal or no deal. She knows that when we leave the European Union, if we leave with no deal we will lose access to 40-plus international trade agreements covering trade with 70 countries, to EU criminal databases and to the EU single market, with which more than 70% of the UK’s exporting businesses trade. Indeed, there could be a delay of two to three years in new medicines reaching patients in the UK. She knows that there are other legal and political options, so is it not time for her to give herself a much better Christmas by
having a vote in the House this week on her deal and then allowing Parliament to start to work together on how we move forward?

The Prime Minister: It was the vote that took place in 2016 that determined that we should leave the European Union. I believe that we should leave the European Union with a good deal, and this is a good deal. I believe that the alternatives that have been put forward in some cases do not deliver on the referendum and in other cases make the use of a backstop even more likely.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Prime Minister will recall my question last week about how we can ensure that it is clear that the UK cannot be forced to stay in the backstop indefinitely due to vetoes on extraneous issues. What comfort did she take from the comments of other European leaders, for example the Chancellor of Austria and the Prime Minister of Denmark, that that might be something the UK is able to secure?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Crucially, a number of European Union leaders made very clear their view about the backstop being temporary or not being used at all. They made it clear that they were willing to listen to further proposals in order to give greater clarification on that point. That is exactly why I think it is right that we carry on talking to the European Union about this matter.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): A hundred years ago, through the suffragettes, we saw women’s empowerment here in Parliament. Why does the Prime Minister not empower MPs here before Christmas, and why will she not empower the people with a second people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Lady to the answers I gave to those questions earlier.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): When President Juncker is not ruffling the hair of female colleagues—I think the Prime Minister got away lightly there—we know that he follows what is said in this House very carefully. He will have heard her say today, “No revocation of article 50 and no second referendum”, and I suspect that he does get some succour from some of the things said in this Chamber. Can she now state for President Juncker the exact date when the United Kingdom will be leaving the European Union?

The Prime Minister: We have that date in our legislation: it is 29 March 2019.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Prime Minister is not interested in the will of the people apart from on one day in 2016, and given that her minority Government were the first ever to be found in contempt and that she pulled the plug on the meaningful vote at the last minute last week, she clearly has little regard for the sovereignty of Parliament either. She has returned from her latest travels empty-handed due to her own red lines, so why will she not allow MPs to vote on her deal this week and consider extending article 50?

It is the season of miracles and good will, but no one—no one at all—believes that this is all going to be neatly concluded by the end of March.

The Prime Minister: I have answered those questions previously. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), it is important that we follow up on the opportunity to seek these further political and legal assurances in relation to the concern that people have on the backstop. It is also important, as I indicated to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen), that we look at the status of the political declaration, which is another issue that people have raised.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for reminding the House that 472 now-sitting Members decided to give a people’s vote in 2015; I suspect that if they had decided to keep the vote just to themselves, they would have voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union, which means that there is now an in-built bias against delivering Brexit.

So please steer a straight course, Prime Minister—the country expects us to deliver Brexit. A people’s vote is simply an opportunity to try to overturn the democratic vote.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is exactly what this Government are doing—steering a course to deliver on what people voted for. We gave them the decision, we asked them to make that decision, they made that decision, and we should respect it.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Is the Prime Minister’s plan B no deal?

The Prime Minister: What I am working on at the moment is to ensure that we can get the assurances necessary to deal with the concerns that people have on the deal that has been negotiated.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I like to think of myself as a friendly fellow, and I have no particular inclination to fall out with colleagues on either side of the Chamber based on the details of the Brexit deal. The one thing I have learned in politics is that it is perfectly reasonable to look at identical information and come to completely different conclusions—but on values, that is where I disagree. Does the Prime Minister agree that to have a second referendum would fundamentally undermine the principle of democracy?

The Prime Minister: I believe that there are many people who voted if not for the first time ever, certainly for the first time for a considerable number of years, in that referendum. They did so in the belief that the politicians were going to listen to them. I think that their belief and faith in politics and politicians, and in our democracy, would be shattered if they were asked to think again. We should deliver on the vote that took place.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I listened very carefully to the words that the Prime Minister used. When asked about indicative votes in the House, she said, “We have no plans.” When asked whether she would revoke article 50, she said, “This Government will not do that.” If the House voted to instruct the Government to revoke article 50, would she resign and make way for another Government who would carry out the wishes of the House?
The Prime Minister: This House voted to revoke article 50, and that would be going against the wishes of the people in the referendum in 2016.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): More than three quarters of my constituents voted to leave the European Union. Can the Prime Minister imagine anything more patronising than the idea that they need more democracy—to have another go? Does she agree that their instruction was very clearly that we should be getting on with it?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. His constituents thought when they voted that the Government were going to deliver on their vote, and that is exactly what we should do.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Prime Minister says that a further referendum would be divisive. It is not referendums per se that are divisive. The 2016 referendum would not have been divisive if the promises made were deliverable. The divisions in our country today only come from two and a half years of Brexit fantasies now hitting the wall of Brexit reality. Brexiteers see the Prime Minister’s deal as a betrayal, and remainers are furious because the whole Brexit argument was based on lies. Does she agree that, in our democracy, we should never be afraid of a public vote, but we should always oppose fantasies and false promises?

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Lady that no Member of this House is afraid of a public vote. Members put themselves up for public votes on a number of occasions in order to be elected to this House. There were two sides of the argument in the referendum. Arguments were put. People voted on their belief as to whether or not we should stay in the European Union, and I believe we should deliver on the vote that people gave.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Many here, including one or two senior members of the Cabinet, no longer refer to the “will of MPs”, which is nothing more than a fig leaf to remain. It was the will of the majority of MPs to give the people a vote. They did so, and now we must honour it. If we fall back on WTO terms, so be it. Lead us, Prime Minister—get this country free and end this rancour.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that it was the will of MPs that the decision as to whether to stay in the European Union be given to the people of this country. We did that, they voted to leave, and we should do it.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): The House may be interested to know that Larry the cat at No. 10 just tweeted:

“Brexit update: Giving people a vote = breaking faith”

Does the Prime Minister agree?

The Prime Minister: I have made the point clearly this afternoon that I believe we should keep faith with the people by delivering on the vote that they gave in 2016.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): I wanted to support this deal, and I want to support this deal. I thank the Prime Minister sincerely for listening to concerns, in particular about the backstop. Does she agree that it is essential that we give her the time necessary to secure the concessions that this House wants? I guarantee her that if she secures them, I will stand four-square behind her.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and I thank him for pointing out that, having listened to the House, it is right that I am able to have time to argue that case with the European Union and seek those further assurances that would give confidence to not only him but other Members.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Prime Minister aware of the damage being caused to manufacturing—particularly automotive—by her failure to rule out no deal?

The Prime Minister: The manufacturing industry welcomed the fact that we have negotiated a deal and welcomed the trade arrangements that we have negotiated for the future partnership. I want to be able to deliver on that for them.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Ahead of the 2016 EU membership referendum, the Government spent more than £9 million of taxpayers’ money on leaflets delivered to every UK home advocating that we remain—but also, crucially, saying that whatever the outcome of the referendum, it would be enacted. Last year, 589 elected Members of this House stood on manifesto pledges to deliver the referendum result. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March next year, deal or no deal?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to confirm that we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March next year. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for pointing out the significant number of Members who stood on a manifesto commitment to deliver on the vote that people took in 2016.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Prime Minister repeatedly claims that the Norway plus option would require a backstop, but on 3 December her Attorney General told me from the Dispatch Box that he could see no reason why Norway plus “would not satisfy the stated objectives of the backstop”…[Official Report, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 572.]

Can she confirm that she agrees with her Attorney General on that point?

The Prime Minister: The issue is partly about whether we have the customs union within the Norway plus model. However, the point about the backstop is that it is there to deal with the period from the end of a transition period to the new relationship—the new relationship being one that will deal with the guarantee to the people of Northern Ireland that there will be no hard border. In any alternative arrangement, it would be necessary to have that negotiation.

Norway-plus is not something that can just happen. This House might want to say it will happen; actually, Norway-plus requires such a negotiation, because we would have to negotiate to be a member of EFTA first in order to get such an arrangement in place. In doing that, there would therefore be a risk that there would be a period of time when no arrangement was in place, and that would require a backstop.
Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): There is growing concern—and, indeed, growing anger—among my constituents at the prospect of a second vote. They feel that their vote has been stolen from them. Bearing in mind that the advocates of a second vote talk about chaos, confusion and uncertainty, does my right hon. Friend agree with me that that would be the result of a second vote on a smaller turnout?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend that there is concern—and I think there should be concern—about the divisive nature of a second referendum if that were to take place, and also concern about the fact, as he has said, that his constituents and many other people up and down the country trusted that the politicians were going to deliver on the vote that they gave in 2016. We have a duty to do so.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): It is clear that the Prime Minister has refused to rule out a no deal, refused to extend article 50 and refused to allow the option of a people’s vote. Can she now tell the House her plan if her deal does not make it through Parliament?

The Prime Minister: As I have said to a number of other hon. Members, if the hon. Lady and others want to ensure that there is not a no deal situation, they have to accept that the alternatives are either accepting a deal or no Brexit. I believe we should be delivering on Brexit, and I believe we should be doing it with a good deal for the UK.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): May I gently remind the Prime Minister that it is not only MPs in this place who have manifesto commitments to honour? The Scottish Government have manifesto commitments to honour, and it would be utterly undemocratic for anyone to try to stand in their way. Will the Prime Minister tell us how many people in this place stood on a manifesto that supported the chaos of no deal? Given that the answer is none, surely that should be the first option that is taken off the table. We can then talk about what kind of deal we can get—and if we cannot get a decent deal, then not leaving should be put back on the table. Surely, giving those choices to the people is more democratic than forcing them out with a no-deal Brexit that nobody voted for.

The Prime Minister: Of course we can ensure that we do not leave with no deal. We can do that by ensuring that we leave with a deal, and a good deal for the whole of the United Kingdom.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Given that the Prime Minister has been on her feet for two hours, I think we are now convinced that she still agrees with herself but is listening to very few other people. Last week, no less a person than her predecessor Sir John Major called for an extension of article 50, but, stubbornly, she still refuses to listen to any advice on this. Please will the Prime Minister listen for once?

The Prime Minister: I have been listening, and that is exactly why we are having further discussions with the European Union in relation to the issue of the backstop—to seek the assurances that Members of this House want.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): The Prime Minister has said today that she is determined to frustrate another vote of the people, and she has done her level best to frustrate a vote in this Parliament. Does she understand why so many people here think that she is trying to confront and bully this House with a last-minute choice between her deal and no deal, even when she knows the catastrophic cost of no deal for swathes of our industry?

May I ask the Prime Minister to clarify for the House this afternoon the simple fact that, when it comes to a meaningful vote in January, this House will indeed be able to rule out no deal and, if necessary, extend article 50?

The Prime Minister: The motion will, of course, be amendable when it comes before the House in January. However, I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that this is about ensuring that we can get the assurances from the European Union—that is what we are working on—and bring them back to this House, having listened to the concerns that have been raised by Members of this House.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Prime Minister said in her statement that she is working on tackling the spread of deliberate, large-scale and systematic disinformation. Does that include the disinformation of Vote Leave and things printed on the side of buses?

The Prime Minister: A number of things were said on both sides of the campaign during the referendum on the European Union. The task we have before us is not to relive that referendum, but to get on with the job of delivering on it.

James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I talked to both sides in my constituency on Saturday. The Prime Minister knows about her Brexit-supporting MPs’ change of heart in her, but my constituents are wondering why she will not ask Bury for its conclusion on her botched deal. Does she regret spending so long appeasing the 1922 instead of building a deal that works for the 48 and the 52?

The Prime Minister: I think I am right in saying that the hon. Gentleman’s constituency voted to leave the European Union in the referendum. Those people who voted to leave will want the Government to deliver on that.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I know why my constituents voted the way they did. It was 58:42. They blamed Europe for the loss of our jobs in manufacturing as a result of the economy going towards finance. Thirty-four of the 43 local authorities are still 13% behind on wages from 2010 and have not recovered. That is why people voted. They have listened to what has been said, but you are not giving them a chance to vote on this offer. Your deal is terrible. It is not a good deal and we will be worse off. The same goes for no deal. Give us a choice. We should have a choice to vote in the House today on your offer.

Mr Speaker: Order. I have not made any offer.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Yours would be better.
Mr Speaker: That is a matter for debate but not a matter for me. The Prime Minister can defend her offer, and I am sure she will.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I say to the hon. Lady that the House will have a choice when the meaningful vote is brought forward on whether or not it accepts the deal that is on the table, and on what it wants in future. That choice will be available, just as the choice was available to her constituents, mine and others up and down the country in 2016 to decide whether or not to stay in the EU.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Sixty-two Members from four parties in the House have today written to the Prime Minister on the mounting concerns being expressed in our great manufacturing industries—automotive, aerospace, shipbuilding, bus building and food. We are walking towards a cliff, and if this uncertainty continues, the bad decisions that are being made for Britain will continue dramatically in the first quarter of next year. We have to have a degree of certainty. Without it, the future for many companies and workers will be catastrophic. Why does the Prime Minister not rule out now any question of a no-deal Brexit?

The Prime Minister: We have engaged with the manufacturing industry, including the automotive industry, which is very important to this country and jobs in this country. The manufacturing industry supported and welcomed the deal when it was negotiated. If the hon. Gentleman wants to support the manufacturing industry and wants to ensure that it has that certainty in future, he can support the deal.

Wes Streeting: The Prime Minister has pointedly not said that her deal is better than the one we have. What sort of Prime Minister puts a deal to Parliament knowing that it would make our country worse off than it would otherwise have been? What sort of Prime Minister could possibly countenance the reckless chaos of a no-deal Brexit? Is that not an insult to the office of Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman asks a question that appears to be based on the premise that we should be looking at staying inside the European Union. The people voted for us to leave the European Union. The economic analysis shows that the best option that meets that requirement and protects jobs is the deal.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Like the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister has set herself firmly against putting this issue back to the people, clearly because they feel that the result this time would be different. Does she agree that both main parties in the House have come full circle, and that we have ended where we began: running scared of UKIP?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady suggests that I thought we should not have a second referendum because it might come out with a different result. Actually, no, I do not think it would come out with a different result. I just believe that when we said to people in 2016, “We give you the choice and we will abide by that choice,” we should stick by our word.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): It is the height of irresponsibility for the Prime Minister to pretend she can win a vote on her deal when every Member of this House, including her, knows she cannot. Nor is there a majority for no deal. When they are both voted down, what next? That question is fundamentally important to the future of this country. If she cannot or will not answer it, she should not be in office.

The Prime Minister: As we continue to work on further assurances on the deal, the hon. Gentleman knows full well that the vote will come before the House. The House will have its vote, and thereafter if the deal is not supported, the Government will bring forward their proposals for the future steps we will be taking.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Prime Minister claims to know what leave voters voted for in 2016, but when I surveyed thousands of my constituents, over half of leave voters said that they wanted to stay in the single market and almost as many said they wanted to be in the customs union. Now that they have seen the shape of the deal on the table—these are leave voters—16% said they had changed their mind and wanted to remain in the European Union. How can the Prime Minister not listen to voters? I hope she will spend the time over the next few weeks actually listening to voters who voted and not to her own rebellious Back Benchers.

The Prime Minister: I assure the hon. Lady that I do listen to voters and I do talk to voters. The overwhelming view given to me by voters is that they want to ensure we get on with delivering the 2016 vote.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Can the Prime Minister imagine any scenario whereby it would be in the national interest to extend article 50?

The Prime Minister: I have answered the question on extending article 50. I believe it is important for us to deliver on the vote that people took. We have it in our legislation that we will leave the European Union on 29 March 2019.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Who does the Prime Minister think will be held responsible if there is no deal: the Executive, Parliament or the people who voted in 2016?

The Prime Minister: Members of this House will have a decision to take in relation to the deal and whether they want to leave the European Union with a deal.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is economically corrosive to delay the deal. For each day that passes, our economy is sliding down. People are becoming poorer and businesses are losing confidence. In the light of the political arithmetic that means the deal will fall, what discussions did the Prime Minister have with her European counterparts this weekend about alternatives, including the extension of article 50?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Lady is concerned and wants to give certainty to business, there is one step she could take that would do that: back the deal.
Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): In light of the impact of the loss of EU citizens in the NHS, a 90% drop in nurses coming here and a trebling of the number of EU nurses leaving, the Prime Minister has sought in recent months to make it clear to EU citizens that they are welcome and they are secure. However, in her response to the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) she implied that they would be secure only if her deal passes. Can she clarify that, because she has just scared more than 3 million people?

The Prime Minister: I know the hon. Lady has a very personal interest in this issue. The withdrawal agreement sets out the agreement that has been reached between the United Kingdom and the European Union on EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU. As a Government, we have been clear that we will protect the interests of European Union citizens in the UK if there is no-deal situation, but of course I cannot at this stage guarantee what would be the situation for UK citizens in the EU 27. That is a matter for those countries and the EU to set forward. The reciprocal arrangement that guarantees both sides is what is in the withdrawal agreement.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): The Prime Minister’s own red lines have brought us to this situation and she is now about to squander billions of pounds-worth of taxpayers’ money on preparing for no deal, when she knows that there is no majority in this House for no deal, so it is completely unjustifiable. If we need more time to negotiate, extending article 50 is the way forward, but she is yet again putting down another red line and stopping us taking the logical step of giving ourselves more time to sort out this situation. Is not that the right way forward?

The Prime Minister: I have responded to a number of questions in relation to that. This House, of course, will have a decision to take as to whether to accept the deal that is on the table. I am working to get those further assurances, as I have said, but this House will have a decision as to whether to accept that deal, and if that deal is voted down, the Government will have to come forward with their proposals for the next steps. The hon. Gentleman uses this phrase that a lot of people use, about red lines. Actually, what the Government have been doing is respecting the vote that people gave in 2016 on issues such as bringing an end to free movement and making sure that we leave the European Union.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Prime Minister publish how many additional civil service jobs would be required either with her deal or no deal, and will she measure that against the number of civil service jobs that have been cut since the EU referendum?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman with the figures for the number of civil servants who have been employed and the numbers who are continuing to be employed in dealing with leaving the European Union, because of course, we are making contingency arrangements for no deal, but there are also a lot of preparations that are taking place that have involved the employment of more civil servants, which are actually about preparing for the deal.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): This embarrassing, reckless Brexit that we find ourselves perilously close to was begun to quell opposition within the Tory party, putting party before country. Now we have a Prime Minister putting her own interests above both party and country. When will the Prime Minister agree that with no majority for her deal, no deal or any other deal, the only democratic way forward is to put this back to the people for a people’s vote?

The Prime Minister: The party in this House that is putting party before country is the Labour party’s Front Bench, who are putting the interests of trying to bring about a general election before the interests of actually getting a deal that works for this country.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Some 78% of my constituents in Edinburgh North and Leith voted to remain and they are extremely concerned about the prospect of no deal, so I will repeat the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) asked, which the Prime Minister signally failed to answer. Will she publish her no-deal planning?

The Prime Minister: We are making preparations for no deal. These preparations are being stepped up. We are continuing to step up those preparations. We have already published a number of issues in relation to no-deal planning, through the technical notices that have been issued, and we will be continuing to make sure that the information that is provided externally is that which is necessary to ensure that people are prepared for the possibility of a no-deal scenario.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for making it very clear in her statement, in her words, that no deal risks jobs, services and security. Can I ask her to act as the leader of this great country and rule out no deal now?

The Prime Minister: The only way to rule out no deal is to ensure that there is a deal that enables us to leave the European Union.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): The Prime Minister has used a mantra ad nauseam: it is her deal or no deal—she almost repeated it again just then—but she must be aware that The Economist magazine, among many, many others, has said that a no-deal Brexit would wreck the economy. Why is she prepared to wreck the economy and can she justify that to the British people?

The Prime Minister: I believe that the best route forward for the United Kingdom is to leave the European Union with a good deal, and I believe that this is a good deal.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): One thing not contained in the Prime Minister’s statement on the Council conclusions is the future of the single market. She should know that leaving the single market risks 80,000 jobs in Scotland. Does she have any idea how many jobs would be lost in the Queenslie and Baillieston industrial estates if we left the single market?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will know that it is clear in the political declaration that we will have a more ambitious trading relationship with the
European Union than any other third country—we will become a third country when we leave the European Union. We have negotiated that deal and that future trading relationship, and that political declaration is the instructions to the negotiators for the future. We have negotiated that precisely with the need to ensure that we protect jobs in our minds. That is what that deal will do.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): With three quarters of a million jobs at risk with a no-deal Brexit, according to the UK Trade Policy Observatory—42,000 of them in my City of Westminster borough—is not it clear that no deal is the most disastrous outcome and that the Prime Minister is playing Russian roulette with people's jobs? Given that one of the few options that could command a majority in the House is a measure to stop no deal, is not it the height of irresponsibility to make us wait a month for a meaningful vote, which will certainly be lost, and not commit to taking whatever action is necessary, including suspending article 50, to ensure that we do not drive the British economy off a cliff?

The Prime Minister: The House will have a decision to take and it will be in the House’s hands as to whether it wishes to support a deal. We cannot wish no deal away. If we are not going to leave with no deal, we have to have an arrangement and a deal with which to leave the European Union.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): In her statement, the Prime Minister talked about integrity and the millions who trusted in democracy. What does she say to those same millions who have witnessed the dark money scandal, Vote Leave breaking the law, cash for votes, the Government gerrymandering the Brexit Committees, a legitimate Bill of the Scottish Parliament being prevented from getting Royal Assent by her court action, and pulling the vote on the deal halfway through the debate? Where is the integrity on those matters? The people deserve their say.

The Prime Minister: I believe it was the case that the issue of the continuity Bill in Scotland was discussed with the Government at the time. The Government made clear their position in relation to that Bill and to this matter. There were discussions with the Scottish Government throughout the passage of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act and we have ensured at every stage that we have consulted and engaged with the Scottish Government and, indeed, the Welsh Government on these matters.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): We have endured months of obfuscation and prevarication, fudge and more fudge made in Maidenhead. The Prime Minister described perfect as the enemy of the good, but she will accept that good leadership demands a demonstration of the courage of one’s convictions. Prime Minister, we are in a serious crisis. Business demands action urgently. It is totally irresponsible and unacceptable to delay the vote until the weeks commencing 7 or 14 January. We need a vote now. If we do not have it before Christmas, please extend article 50 because businesses demand it.

The Prime Minister: Businesses have been clear that they want to see us leaving with a deal. They have welcomed the deal that we have negotiated and it is therefore in Members’ hands to recognise that when they come to vote.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Just so that I am clear, is the Prime Minister saying, beyond a shadow of a doubt, in all circumstances, that when her deal is voted down, she will not bring forward any option other than leaving without a deal?

The Prime Minister: I have been clear about the decision that Members will have to take. If the deal is voted down, it is very clear: we have the process set out in legislation that the Government will follow.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Over the weekend, we heard the news that many in the academic community were dreading: that immigration rules for EU nationals will be based on salary and perceived skill levels. Will the Prime Minister please elaborate on how categorisation of skill level will be done? Can she explain how we will continue to attract talented young researchers, who earn far less than £30,000?

The Prime Minister: It was not at the weekend that we said we would move to a skills-based immigration system; we have been clear about that for some months. The figure of £30,000 was the figure that was set out in the Migration Advisory Committee’s report.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): The Prime Minister has described a new vote on Europe as an act of bad faith. This is the Prime Minister who tried to deny Parliament a meaningful vote and then pulled the vote when she knew that she would lose. This is the Prime Minister who claimed that it was her way or no way, despite the option of revoking article 50. This is the Prime Minister who told 10,000 people from other EU countries living, working and contributing in my constituency that they had jumped the queue. Is she in any position to lecture anyone about what it means to act in good faith on this issue?

The Prime Minister: I simply repeat to the hon. Gentleman the points that I have made about the vote that took place in 2016, and about the duty that we have in relation to that.

Hugh Gaffney (Cotabridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): This morning, when I went to my old workplace, Glasgow Parcelforce, where parcels containing goods are moved about, workers told me that they were worried about this Brexit deal. In my constituency, where unemployment is rising, workers are worried about their future. Has the Prime Minister a Christmas message for them, or does she want to revert to the 2017 general election?

The Prime Minister: I believe that it is right for this country to leave the European Union. That is what people voted for. I believe that it is right for us to leave with a good deal, and I believe that we have a good deal. Members have expressed some concerns about a particular aspect of that, and I am working to reassure them on that particular point. I hope that it will then be possible for Members to recognise the importance of protecting jobs, and to support a good deal for leaving the EU.
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The 48% seem to count for nothing any more. They did not vote for this descent into chaos, and many cautioned, “You should not leave unless you know where you are going.” Is it not time, in the national interest, to revoke article 50, not least to allow those who claim to speak for the 52% to sort out what they actually want?

The Prime Minister: Revoking article 50 means staying in the European Union and it is not possible to revoke article 50, to go back into the EU and then come out again in a few months’ time. The judgment of the European Court of Justice was absolutely clear on this point: revoking article 50 means staying in the European Union.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Democracy is a process, not a historical event in time, and it is essential for the public to maintain faith in that process. Can the Prime Minister give me one good reason why we should respect the result of a referendum that was mired in extensive cheating and rule breaking over having another referendum?

The Prime Minister: The referendum took place. The Government were clear at the time, and Parliament was clear at the time, that this was a choice for the British people. The British people chose, and I think we should deliver on that choice.

Points of Order

5.52 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have listened very carefully to all the answers that the Prime Minister gave during the lengthy exchange today. I have listened very carefully to what Members on all sides of the House have said and it is very clear that it is very bad—unacceptable—that we should wait almost a month before we have a meaningful vote on a crucial issue that faces this country. The Prime Minister obdurately refused to ensure that a vote took place on the date that she agreed. She refuses to allow a vote to take place this week, and I assume she now thinks that the vote will take place on 14 January—almost a month away. That is not acceptable in any way whatsoever.

As it is the only way I can think of to ensure that a vote takes place this week, I am about to table a motion which says the following: “That this House has no confidence in the Prime Minister due to her failure to allow the House of Commons to have a meaningful vote straight away on the withdrawal agreement and framework for future relationships between the UK and the European Union.” That motion will be tabled immediately, Mr Speaker. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the Opposition for what he has said. It requires no response from me, but it is on the record.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In response to a couple of questions from my hon. Friends, the Prime Minister implied that Scottish National party MPs and the Scottish Government were aware at the time the Bill was brought that the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill was outwith the legislative competence of the Scottish Parliament. I am sure that the Prime Minister has inadvertently overlooked the fact that last week the UK Supreme Court passed judgment in the case that was referred to by the Attorney General and found in fact that the Bill was within the competence of the Scottish Parliament when passed—all save one clause, clause 17—and that it was only the subsequent enactment of the EU withdrawal Act that retrospectively took powers away from the Scottish Parliament, meaning that the Bill was no longer within its powers.

Tory Members of the Scottish Parliament have been peddling misinformation about the Supreme Court judgment and there have been a number of inaccurate media reports over the last few days. I am certain that the Prime Minister would not mean to perpetuate misunderstandings about a judgment of the UK Supreme Court, Mr Speaker, and I seek your guidance on how I can put the matter straight and on the record.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for what he has said. It requires no response from me, but it is on the record.
hon. and learned Lady will seek to spread copies of the Official Report far and wide, in her own constituency and doubtless beyond.

As far as Ministers are concerned, including the Prime Minister, it is of course incumbent on any Minister who thinks that he or she may inadvertently have given incorrect information to the House to correct the record. Whether in this case it has been decided to do so is not a matter for me, but I hope that the hon. and learned Lady feels that she has achieved her objective this afternoon.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Over the weekend, it became very clear that the Prime Minister has some strong views on certain subjects. One is her view on Tony Blair, which I know she shares with the Leader of the Opposition, and another is her view on the merits of a people’s vote, which she also shares with the Leader of the Opposition. But however intense the Prime Minister’s antipathy to a people’s vote may be, is it in order for her to leak chunks of her speech before coming to the House to make a statement, which contains the same chunks of her speech that were leaked to the press at 10.30 last night?

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he wished to raise this matter. Certainly I agree, wholeheartedly and without equivocation, with the proposition that announcements of Government policy should be made in the House, and should not be preannounced to the media. That is not just a courtesy expected of the Government, but an important principle.

However, I think it only fair to add that the Government might, in this case, argue that the No. 10 press release to which the right hon. Gentleman referred contained no announcement of Government policy, but merely reiterated what the Prime Minister had told the House last week. I understand the sense of disquiet, even irritation, that the right hon. Gentleman feels, but I think that, in the name of even-handedness, it is reasonable for me to put that second point on the record to sit alongside, and to be judged against, the first.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind) rose—

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil). I am saving him up. I do not want to squander the hon. Gentleman too early.

Frank Field: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Given your record of being a champion of Back Benchers against those on both Front Benches, may I ask whether there is a way to do it, and a much less preferable way to do it. The Government chose the course that they did, and, as things stand, that course appears to be set.

I also explained to the House, and with a view to people outside this House, that whatever the Chair might think about matters of procedure, the Chair must operate within the powers of the Chair; manifestly, the Chair cannot operate ultra vires. The clear evidence, and all the precedents support this, is that an Order of the Day in respect of a piece of Government business can be moved only by a representative of the Government—that is to say by a Minister or a Government Whip. So I was able to express disquiet on behalf of many Members across the House at the sudden deferral of the vote, but I was not in a position to bring about the continuation of the debate or the vote upon it.

The right hon. Gentleman asks what recourse he has, and if he has any recourse, and I say to him that it is always possible for Members to table motions in this House. I am not exhorting him to do so, nor am I discouraging him from doing so; the right hon. Gentleman is extremely experienced and knows that that option exists. He has a motion on the paper; he can seek to gather support for that motion, or if another motion that is judged to be pertinent to his objectives is tabled, he can seek to garner support for such an approach.

My role is to serve this House. I would be perfectly happy to chair debates over the Christmas period; I would be perfectly happy to come back on 2 January and sit in this Chair. Millions of people are going to be working on 2 January, and we could do that, but it is not for me to say when the House should sit, when it should debate and when it should vote. That has to be determined by others, but I am here to serve and if the House decided it wanted to proceed at a faster pace it would be my responsibility to be here, and I would gladly accept that responsibility.

Frank Field: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Would it be in order if one or more of the Opposition parties gave their time early in the new year so we could reassemble and vote on the six or so options you might choose? Would that be in order even if the Government had not moved their own motion?

Mr Speaker: My sense is that for the date upon which the House sits to be changed would very likely require a conversation; I am speaking, I say to the right hon. Gentleman for the avoidance of doubt, off the top of my head, but that almost certainly would require a conversation and agreement between the usual channels. If there were such an agreement, nothing is impossible.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that there is a supply of Opposition days, but the Government will normally give an indication of when there will be an Opposition day, and that is usually a matter of negotiation between the two sides; it is not something on which the Speaker can rule. But I do not say that what the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting is impossible; what I am suggesting is that there seems to be some distance to travel between his aspiration and its realisation.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the point of order of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) about the Prime
Minister’s response to my question in her statement, as the Prime Minister has inadvertently overlooked the facts of the matter in terms of the UK withdrawal from the EU Bill of the Scottish Parliament, when does convention in this House suggest that the Prime Minister be expected to correct the record as a courtesy to the House so as to be accurate, particularly given the office she holds in the United Kingdom?

Mr Speaker: If an error is judged to have been made, the correction should be made with dispatch. In other words, if a Member believes that he or she has erred, there should not be delay; the record should be corrected without delay.

Good Work Plan

6.3 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): I would like to make a statement on the good work plan published today, which sets out the Government’s vision for the future of the UK labour market and how we will implement the recommendations arising from the Matthew Taylor review of modern working practices.

The Taylor review was commissioned by the Prime Minister to examine the current labour market and the employment law framework to help us understand the opportunities of future working practices as well as to identify areas where it is not working for everyone. The Government responded to the review in February, accepting the vast majority of the recommendations. Alongside this response, we also launched four consultations to seek views on how best to implement the recommendations. I am very grateful to everyone who took the time to respond; their insights have been invaluable in informing our policy development.

The good work plan I am publishing today sets out a programme for ensuring the UK labour market continues to thrive in the future. The UK labour market has a very positive record in recent years. Since 2010 we have higher employment and lower unemployment in every region and every nation of the United Kingdom, and wages are now growing at their fastest pace in almost a decade. This success has been underpinned by an employment law and policy framework that combines flexibility with protections for workers.

New ways of working and the rise of new employment models offer great opportunities, including innovative products and services for consumers, as well as new ways in which individuals can find work, earn a living and develop their talents. Our industrial strategy set out a long-term plan to embrace the opportunities presented by these changes and to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout the UK.

Good work and developing better jobs are at the centre of the vision of the industrial strategy, so I am proud to be the first Secretary of State to take responsibility for promoting the quality of work as well as the creation of new jobs. I have written to the independent Industrial Strategy Council to ask for its participation in considering the best ways to measure the quality of work in the United Kingdom, and I am very pleased that Matthew Taylor serves as a member of the new Industrial Strategy Council.

Another core element of the quality of work agenda is ensuring we address the challenges for employment law and policy that the Taylor review identified. Most UK employers do the right thing and ensure their workers benefit from the rights and protections to which they are entitled. We will not allow these high standards to be breached by a minority who try to deny workers their just entitlements.

Among these reforms are steps to improve clarity for both employers and workers. Matthew Taylor recommended that the Government should do more to help individuals and businesses understand their rights and obligations. He highlighted that the existing employment status tests have contributed to a lack of clarity for both individuals and employers. We agree with this conclusion and will legislate to make improvements to reflect the reality of modern working relationships.
Matthew Taylor also recommended that renewed effort should be made to align the employment status frameworks for the purposes of employment rights and tax to ensure that the differences between the two systems are reduced to an absolute minimum. Again, we agree and will bring forward detailed proposals to align the two frameworks. We are also committed to addressing what Matthew Taylor termed one-sided flexibility, where too much risk has been transferred to the individual, sometimes to the detriment of their financial security and personal wellbeing. We will legislate to give all workers a right to request a more predictable contract and address the obstacles employees can face in building up continuous service. We will also legislate to end the injustice faced by waiters and waitresses and other staff in hospitality whose tips left by customers for them are diverted to their employers.

Another fundamental reform that Matthew Taylor proposed was the repeal of the so-called Swedish derogation, which exempts agency workers from equal pay requirements. Therefore, the Government are today bringing forward legislation to prevent this type of contract from being used to avoid meeting the legitimate rights of agency workers. We are also today laying legislation to extend workers’ rights, including the right to a written statement and making this available to all workers from day one. We are also bringing forward legislation to provide workers with a longer reference period for the calculation of holiday pay, and the good work plan sets out how this approach will mirror the tough financial penalties and enforcement approach that already apply to the underpayment of the national minimum wage. We are also taking steps to improve the effectiveness of employment tribunals, quadrupling the penalties that they can impose for persistent breaches of employment law. We want to continue to improve the enforcement landscape further, and in the light of forthcoming policy changes, we will also consider the case for creating a new single labour market enforcement agency, to better ensure that vulnerable workers are more aware of, and can exercise, their rights and that businesses will be able to deal with a single body on matters relating to their workplace.

The good work plan sets out a vision for the future of the UK labour market—a labour market that rewards people for hard work, that celebrates good employers and a long-standing and proud record of high standards, and new opportunities for workers become available. This demonstrates how we are putting the good work plan into action immediately.

We also recognise the vital role effective enforcement plays in ensuring confidence to challenge when the law and regulations are broken and in creating a level playing field between businesses. Matthew Taylor called on the Government to improve access to justice in the workplace. We have already committed to extending state enforcement on behalf of vulnerable workers to the underpayment of holiday pay, and the good work plan sets out how this approach will mirror the tough financial penalties and enforcement approach that already apply to the underpayment of the national minimum wage. We are also taking steps to improve the effectiveness of employment tribunals, quadrupling the penalties that they can impose for persistent breaches of employment law. We want to continue to improve the enforcement landscape further, and in the light of forthcoming policy changes, we will also consider the case for creating a new single labour market enforcement agency, to better ensure that vulnerable workers are more aware of, and can exercise, their rights and that businesses will be able to deal with a single body on matters relating to their workplace.

The good work plan sets out a vision for the future of the UK labour market—a labour market that rewards people for hard work, that celebrates good employers and is ambitious about boosting productivity and the potential for everyone in the UK to improve their earnings. I am grateful to Matthew Taylor and his panel, as well as to the many other individuals and organisations that have contributed to the review of modern working practices and our subsequent consultation. Their input has been invaluable in helping the Government to ensure that the UK labour market is ready to embrace future opportunities without detriment to workers’ rights. I would also like to thank the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the Work and Pensions Committee and the Scottish Affairs Committee for their continued contributions to the scrutiny of the recommendations and for the recommendations that they have made.

Alongside the good work plan, the Government are today publishing their response to the first full strategy from the director of labour market enforcement. Sir David Metcalf’s strategy was published on 9 May 2018 and made 37 recommendations on labour market enforcement and raising awareness of employment rights. The Government’s response accepts the vast majority of the recommendations and sets out the steps that the Government will take forward on raising awareness of employment rights, on improving intelligence gathering on abuses of those rights and on strengthening enforcement efforts. I will be placing a copy of this document in the Library of the House. The Home Secretary and I look forward to working with Sir David as the Government implement the recommendations we have accepted and as he prepares to set clear strategic priorities in the 2019-20 labour market enforcement strategy.

As Matthew Taylor concluded, the British model works. We have high employment, low unemployment and a long-standing and proud record of high standards for workers. We will consistently be in the vanguard of reform to maintain this reputation as new technologies and new opportunities for workers become available. This response to Taylor is in keeping with these high standards, and I commend this statement to the House.

6.12 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving me advance sight of his statement, but behind his declaration on high employment lies a dark truth. Nearly 4 million people are in insecure work, with 1.1 million working in the gig economy. At a time of low wages, stagnating productivity and endemic financial insecurity across the UK, I had hoped for something big today. I was hoping for proposals that would not only make our workforce feel secure but ensure that their human capital was genuinely valued as the linchpin of Britain’s industrial strategy.

Proposals for a labour inspectorate, the abolition of the Swedish derogation and ensuring that workers keep their tips were among Labour’s policies to transform our labour market, so I am pleased that, after a hard-fought campaign by Labour Members and our trade unions, these points have finally made an appearance in the Government’s good work plan. However, as the TUC stated today, despite these small victories, the remaining “reforms as a whole won’t shift the balance of power in the gig economy.”

Let me deal with just a few of the proposals.

First, the good work plan states at the outset: “The Prime Minister has committed that we will not only maintain workers’ rights as the UK leaves the EU, but enhance them”, but even that opening paragraph is a little—shall we say?—constructive with reality. The Government’s withdrawal agreement fails to live up to this commitment on workers’ rights, and the Institute for Public Policy Research has stated that
“the non-regression clause will not maintain current protections in full, enforcement procedures would be ineffective and if the EU were to raise standards, there would be no requirement for the UK to follow suit”.

Can the Secretary of State confirm today that if standards on workers’ rights increase within the EU, UK standards will follow suit?

Secondly, it appears that the critical point on employment status is equally ambiguous. People on the margins need to know whether they are employees, workers or neither. Do they qualify for unfair dismissal and redundancy or not? The Government are committing to legislating to improve the clarity of the tests, but there is no detail. Can the Secretary of State confirm the legal principles on which each status is likely to rest?

Thirdly, the Government will allow workers on zero-hours contracts to request a more predictable and stable contract. That all sounds rather lovely, but the Secretary of State must know that an ability to request stable hours exists now. What does not exist is an obligation on the employer to meet such a request. The Government’s paper is silent on that point. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the proposed draft legislation will address that deficiency? If it fails to do so, zero-hours contract workers will—as the TUC so poetically put it today—have “no more leverage than Oliver Twist”.

The fourth critical issue is enforcement, on which there is again very little detail in the Government’s plan. This is not simply a question of shuffling the deck. The Government need to ensure that the enforcement agency has power and resources. In the light of the already swingeing cuts to bodies such as the Health and Safety Executive, can the Secretary of State confirm what financial commitments are being made to ensure that this proposal is financially supported?

Finally, on the proposal for increased penalties following successful employment tribunal claims, I am not against the principle but I fear that this is just window dressing. The TUC has stated that the current system for enforcing employment tribunal awards is not fit for purpose, with 35% of successful claimants not receiving any compensation. Can the Secretary of State tell us how increasing fines will address this? Will he also tell us what additional action he is taking to address the efficacy of tribunal award enforcement? The horrific tales of insecure workers swirl around us like passages from a Charles Dickens novel, from delivery drivers being forced to urinate in bottles to zero-hours staff giving birth in workplace toilets. The Government’s proposals were an opportunity to improve the lives of those workers, but sadly they fall dramatically short, and those workers face a Dickensian future unless the Government take serious action to protect and enforce the intrinsic value of their human capital within our economy.

Greg Clark: I would have thought that the hon. Lady might have congratulated Matthew Taylor, who worked for her party in the past. Along with his panel, he has devoted himself to producing a report that most people conclude is a substantial one. He has made a series of far-reaching recommendations, which we are enacting today. The central basis of his report is to reflect on the fact that we should build on success. He refers to the UK’s successful record in creating jobs, including flexible jobs, that open up work to people with different needs.

That is an important step forward that I would have thought the hon. Lady welcomed. When it comes to the condition of employees and workers in this country, Matthew Taylor noted that, far from the Dickensian caricature that she fell into the trap of describing, the average take-home pay for someone in full-time employment in this country, if tax levels and tax credits are taken into account, is higher than in the rest of the G7. We also have higher employment than at any time in our history and lower unemployment than at any time in 40 years, and the hon. Lady should have welcomed that.

The hon. Lady mentioned zero-hours contracts, but what she did not mention—[Interruption.] She mentioned the gig economy, by which I think she was referring to zero-hours contracts. At the moment, 2.4% of workers have flexible zero-hours contracts, and the number is falling. It has fallen from more than 900,000 a year ago. The key thing is that two thirds of those workers do not want an increase in hours. Nearly 20% of them are in full-time education. Matthew Taylor therefore concluded correctly that to ban zero-hours contracts, as the hon. Lady would, would do a disservice to, and go against the interests of, the people who benefit from them.

As for the scale of our response, the last set of measures to change and reform employment rights to this extent came over 20 years ago in the Employment Rights Act 1996 and not, coincidentally, under the previous Labour Administration, reflecting the fact that it is always Conservatives in government who put in protections for workers. The Labour party can criticise, but it did not take the opportunity to make the reforms that the hon. Lady mentioned. The hon. Lady also mentioned the alignment of the test for employment and for taxation. Matthew Taylor was clear in his report that it is a complex matter that will take some time to bring into effect and that we should consult carefully on it, and the Select Committees have endorsed that recommendation. We have said that we are committed to ending the disparity and to bringing the difference to a conclusion, and she should welcome that.

Finally, the hon. Lady mentioned the European Union, referring to the fact that we will be able to set our own employment policies once we leave the European Union. The Prime Minister has been clear that not only will we not reduce the protections that workers enjoy, but we will increase them, and today shows that. We are laying legislation this very day that goes far beyond the rights that are currently available in the European Union. The hon. Lady should have confidence in the ability of this House and this country to lead the world in employment rights, and I am proud that our Government are doing it.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement on how he and the Government plan to take forward the Taylor review. He is right that too much risk has been transferred to the individual in many circumstances, but I am a little puzzled as to why there is still so little action to strengthen protections for pregnant women. That action was promised around two years ago following a Women and Equalities Committee inquiry into maternity discrimination, which highlighted the fact that more than 50,000 women a year leave their jobs because they are pregnant. Will my right hon. Friend update the House on what is being
done to enhance such protections and to ensure that more women who are contributing so much to our economy are able to stay in work even when they are pregnant and afterwards?

**Greg Clark:** My right hon. Friend, who is Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, will be pleased to note that the package announced today is not the first or the only set of powers that will strengthen workers’ protections. The Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), will respond shortly and enthusiastically to the recommendations made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), and I hope that she will welcome the further extension of protections for pregnant women.

**Drew Hendry** (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement, which contained a couple of things to welcome. First, the Scottish National party has long called on the Government to repeal the Swedish derogation loophole and ensure that agency workers are protected and treated fairly. It is therefore welcome news that the Government are closing a loophole that has allowed unscrupulous employers to circumvent equal pay entitlements for far too long. Secondly, we are pleased to see an increase in fines for employers who breach workers’ rights, which has been long in the waiting.

However, there are measures that miss the mark or are missing completely from the statement. There is nothing to tackle zero-hours contracts, but perhaps the most disappointing of all is the absence of any meaningful action. It is extraordinary that this Government say that they have a good work plan and yet they utterly fail to tackle zero-hours contracts. The measures also do not address the damage done to workers’ rights by the regressive Trade Union Act 2016, which was designed to strike at the heart of trade unions’ abilities to organise and support workers. The SNP believes that a modern and progressive approach to industrial relations and trade unionism is at the heart of being able to achieve fair work.

The measures also do nothing to ensure that people are paid a real living wage. In addition to expecting people to work for less than a real living wage, this Government are presiding over a period of wage growth decline. Contrast that with the Scottish Government, who have got behind the real living wage accreditation scheme, which has led to over 1,000 employers now paying the real living wage, covering nearly 82% of workers in Scotland. The Secretary of State also failed to take any action to end the discrimination of young people in the labour market, which my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has long called for.

The statement does nothing to tackle unpaid work trial shifts. The Government call this a good work plan, but they still refuse to end the practice of unpaid trials, and the Unpaid Trial Work Periods (Prohibition) Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), which would define the status of workers in the law. This Government should be doing much more work on workers’ rights, and they need to bring it forward.

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman will know that the Scottish Affairs Committee’s inquiry into the future of working practices in Scotland was warm in its endorsement of the Taylor report’s key recommendations that we are implementing today. I therefore hope that he will continue to support it.

The hon. Gentleman mentions zero-hours contracts, which were the subject of one of Matthew Taylor’s central pieces of analysis. On the basis of rigorous and extensive research across all parts of the United Kingdom, he concluded:

“To ban zero hours contracts in their totality would negatively impact many more people than it helped.”

If we commission an independent report that has authority and depth of research and it makes such a clear recommendation, we ought to act on it. That is what we are doing in our response. The hon. Gentleman also mentioned the national living wage, but he did not refer to the fact that 117,000 people in Scotland have gained over £2,750 since its introduction. However, I note of course that the Scottish Government’s decision to increase taxes on working people has meant that over a million Scots are actually receiving less in take-home pay than they otherwise might. If we are looking at the welfare of workers in Scotland, we need to look at what they pay in tax as well.

It gives me no pleasure to point out to the hon. Gentleman that Scotland under the SNP has had the slowest rate of job growth of all the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. Indeed, if Scotland had matched the UK’s rate of job growth, nearly 200,000 more Scots would have a job. It is right to build on Matthew Taylor’s analysis of how to build on the success while extending protections. I look forward to working with Derek Mackay and the Scottish Government, because many aspects of the report, such as education policy, are relevant to people’s ability to earn more. Through our industrial strategy, we will work together, but a little more humility from the hon. Gentleman in his criticisms might be appropriate.

**Robert Halfon** (Harlow) (Con): Amid all the Brexit fog, I have to say that this is the best news I have heard from the Government for weeks. This is an example of the Conservatives truly being the workers’ party of the United Kingdom, and I strongly welcome what the Secretary of State said about agency workers, because many constituents have suffered as a result of the Swedish derogation.

Turning to apprentices, a fifth of apprentice at levels 2 and 3 were not paid the apprentice minimum wage, which was highlighted by the Education Committee in our report on apprentices. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has prosecuted fewer than five employers, and Sir David Metcalf, the director of labour market enforcement, said that we should increase fines and seek more criminal prosecutions against the companies involved. On top of the excellent work that Sir David has done, will the Secretary of State ensure that apprentices’ rights are first and foremost in his work?
Greg Clark: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his endorsement. The great reforms being made in response to, in this case, a very good report are happening at pace—we are tabling legislation this very day—but he, like me, is sometimes frustrated that the reforms do not get the attention they merit, but he gives me the opportunity to draw the House’s attention to them today.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right about apprentices. A key part of the industrial strategy is to increase the quality and the number of apprenticeships, to which he has made a distinguished contribution. It is vital that apprentices should be paid what they are due in terms of the minimum wages. We have doubled the enforcement budget for Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and the measures we have set out—we are working very closely with Sir David Metcalf—will make sure it is clearly understood by every employer that paying the minimum wages, whether for apprentices or others, is not optional but essential if they are to trade in this country.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): The Select Committees on Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and on Work and Pensions concluded that workers frequently rely on employment tribunals to enforce their rights and recommended punitive fines on employers for breaches of law. The Government are increasing the potential payouts for those who get to tribunal, which I warmly welcome, but they are refusing to reduce tribunal fees. Will the Secretary of State pledge to look at that again? Will the Government listen to Sir David Metcalf, the director of labour market enforcement, who said today that he is disappointed that the Government have rejected his recommendation of greater penalties for non-compliance in paying the minimum wage?

Will the Secretary of State tell us how many more cases need to be won against employers like Uber, Hermes and Addison Lee before the Government act, name and shame and properly punish these businesses that wrongly classify their workers as self-employed and deny them the rights to which they are entitled?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, for her comments and for welcoming our increase in penalties. It is essential that we send a message that people’s employment rights are non-negotiable and that penalties are important to remind ourselves, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon) did, that the Conservative party has always believed that free enterprise should be associated with high standards for consumers, for workers and for members of our community. That is very much in our tradition, and it has not required imposition from outside this Parliament. We embrace our responsibilities with enthusiasm.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): As the Secretary of State knows, we have had reports from Select Committees and from Andrew Forsey and myself on how the gig economy works to the detriment of careworkers, Hermes couriers, Uber drivers, DPD couriers, Parcelforce drivers and Deliveroo drivers who are forced into self-employment against their will. When his package of reforms hits the statute book, will he be able to give all those workers a guarantee that no one in this country will be forced into self-employment against their will?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman and the Work and Pensions Committee for their proposals. He and the hon. Member for Leeds West (Rachel Reeves), the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, have suggested a Bill so that these measures could be enacted straightaway. We have acted in that spirit, and this day we have tabled a large number of statutory instruments to bring them into effect immediately.

My ambition is exactly as the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) says, that the flexibility of the gig economy is offered rather than compelled, and that flexibility, in the words of Matthew Taylor, should be two-sided, rather than one way. That is the intention of this package of reforms. The Work and Pensions Committee will be rigorous in scrutinising the effects, but that is precisely the intention of the reforms.

James Cleverly (Brantree) (Con): The hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) mentioned the Dickensian and Edwardian eras. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when we consider the Mines and Collieries Act 1842 that took children out of mines and collieries, the Artisans’ and Labourers’ Dwellings Improvement Act 1875 that cleared the slums and paved the way for the Peabody Trust homes that are loved to this day, and the Workmen’s Compensation Act 1897 that imposed a duty on employers to compensate workers injured at work, this is the party—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. This is a statement. We do not have heckling during a statement. The hon. Gentleman is asking a question, and then everyone will have a chance to ask their questions in the same way.
James Cleverly: I will not start again from the beginning. The Conservative party, in government, has more than a century of tradition of protecting and enhancing workers’ rights. The Secretary of State’s proposals are in a long tradition of looking to the future and realising the importance of the people whose work underpins our economic growth.

Greg Clark: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Continuing the historical theme, I would add Shaftesbury’s Factory Acts, which were foundational to ensuring that the industrial revolution could not trample on workers’ rights and that those rights were protected. To bring it further up to date, I pay tribute to Lord Hague’s Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which is also in this firm Conservative tradition that I am proud to be taking forward today.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): Despite what the Secretary of State says, in the two and a half years since the Prime Minister promised to act on workers’ rights we have had a review, we have had a consultation on the review, we have had a consultation on the consultation and, now, we have a plan but no legislation. The press release refers to building on the Government’s record, but the Government have not yet tabled a Bill. May I offer him my ready-made private Member’s Bill, the Employment and Workers’ Rights Bill, which would immediately end the Swedish derogation, offer insecure workers a proper right to a contract and finally give people in precarious work the security they need?

Greg Clark: The hon. Lady is misinformed. The legislation has been tabled today.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Flexibility in our labour market is to be welcomed but exploitation is not. Sadly this distinction is too often missed by those on the Labour Front Bench in their pursuit of ideological dogma. What assessment has my right hon. Friend made of the impact of banning exclusivity clauses in zero-hours contracts?

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I welcome the announcement about the Swedish derogation—it would be churlish not to—but I was surprised that there was no mention in the statement of people with disabilities. If this country is to punch above our weight in an increasingly competitive world, we will have to empower people with disabilities as never before; it would be folly not to use their skills and knowledge in the future. How will the Secretary of State ensure that the 21st century economy works for our disabled people?

Greg Clark: I mentioned the Disability Discrimination Act, which was a landmark piece of legislation. One aspect of enforcement and clarity that the new regulations and legislation will bring in is on the right to be free from discrimination, including on grounds of disability, to make sure that that is, first, clearly understood and, secondly, more effectively enforced. This is a further step to promote that very important set of rights for workers.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I very much welcome the tone and content of the Secretary of State’s statement. Torbay’s economy is very dependent on the tourism industry, where there are not only many gig workers who literally undertake gigs, but those who do part-time or agency work. How does he see the plans he is setting out today striking the balance between the need to have an industry that can employ seasonally and flexibly, and ensuring that workers can have certainty in their employment?

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I welcome this long overdue statement and, in particular, the ending of exploitative pay between assignment contracts. I congratulate, in a heartfelt way, Sally Bridge and all at the Communications Workers Union who have campaigned for so long for this. I also thank the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), and indeed her predecessor, for meeting me about this matter.

But is this not a work in progress? Is there not so much further to go, given that important British employers now use the living wage to reduce people’s terms and conditions? These loopholes need to be ended, so that a fair day’s work gets a fair day’s pay.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): The good work plan is, in many ways, the first Government document to really wrestle with the changes technology has brought about on workers. I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has brought in meaningful changes, but he has not imposed things that would limit the future flexibility of both employers and employees, so this country can maximise the opportunities of that industrial revolution rather than have that done unto us by other countries.
Greg Clark: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. His expertise tells him that when technological changes come about, we want to be in a position to embrace them, rather than keep them at bay. This is the first report, the first investigation in the world, that looks at the changes that technologies are making to the labour market. By getting ahead of the game, it allows us to prepare for that, so that we can embrace those changes with confidence, knowing that they would lead to high standards, rather than, as I am afraid some Opposition Members have advocated, keep them at bay and restrict the deployment of technology. That is not in the interests of workers or consumers.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I am not necessarily sure we should take historical lectures from a political party that introduced the Masters and Servant Act 1823, which determined which devices could be used to discipline workers. Does the Secretary of State not agree that the biggest single factor in reducing zero-hours contracts is trade union activity? If he does agree with that, should we not present legislation that says that zero-hours contracts should be allowed only where there is a collective agreement with a recognised trade union, as is sensibly written in the Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill?

Greg Clark: I do not agree with that, but I think the ability for workers to be part of receiving information and of the consultation on the practice of their businesses is very important. Part of the reforms we are bringing in will lower the threshold for workers in companies to be included in requirements to be involved in the future direction of their company and to be given information. So there is an increase in participation, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will at least welcome that.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): A young, highly vulnerable member of my constituency who has a long history with mental health services did exactly what the Government ask—she went out and took a job as a cleaner. Unfortunately, at the place she was cleaning, the workers had no rights to go to the toilet without losing pay, so they started using the waste paper bins as toilets. When emptying a bin, my constituent found herself covered in urine. When she complained to the management, she faced bullying from the workforce, who were going to lose pay because of the need to go to the toilet. Will the Minister agree to ensure that whatever legislation he brings forward will cover workers’ rights on pay and going to the toilet, so that they are not forced into the humiliating position of having to use waste bins rather than lose pay?

Greg Clark: I am shocked at the example the hon. Lady gives; it is a disgraceful example of the kind of practices that have no place in any 21st-century country, let alone the UK. I can confirm to her that as part of the clarity we are bringing to the different categories of workers, employees and the self-employed, we will make it crystal clear that if someone is regarded as self-employed, they cannot be imposed on in terms of the detailed working hours, and if they are an employee, of course they are entitled to breaks, including comfort breaks. The ambiguity has in some unscrupulous examples been used to intimidate and bully in the way that she describes.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): There are proposals to welcome in this statement, but it says an awful lot about this Government that they have to stretch back more than 100 years to find good examples of advancing Conservative employment laws. The Secretary of State could have talked about the doubling of the length of time that employees have to wait to enjoy full employment rights, which was introduced in 2012. He could have talked about the employment tribunal fees introduced in 2013 or about the draconian Trade Union Bill introduced in 2015. Under this Conservative Government, even the Prime Minister’s job security is not all that safe either.

Companies such as Uber are subject to licences awarded by public authorities, so may I ask the right hon. Gentleman to look carefully and seriously at whether licensing authorities such as the Mayor of London, Transport for London and others could take into account employment rights and practices before awarding licences, or indeed—I am thinking across Government here—awarding contracts?

Greg Clark: I mentioned some recent examples of legislation, to which I might add the national living wage, which has made a huge difference and led to the fastest growth in the rate of pay for the lowest earners in 20 years. When it comes to the examples that the hon. Gentleman gave, my intention is clear: whoever someone works for in the gig economy, their rights should be clear and fair. Whether they are regulated by the Mayor of London or are not subject to regulation, those rights should be unambiguous, clear and enforced.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): If an individual’s employment status is established, that individual themselves has the key to unlock different sets of rights. Matthew Taylor recommended that employers should bear the burden of proof; why has the Secretary of State moved that burden on to employees or workers, who will have to establish their employment status?

Greg Clark: As of today, the new legislation that we have introduced will give the right to a day-one written statement of the rights of workers. They will be told unambiguously, as of right, what they are entitled to as part of their employment. The separate issue, which the hon. Lady might be eliding with that one, is whether the different rights associated with different categories of employment or self-employment are clear enough. That will require some changes in the law and regulations, to which we have committed, but the combination of the entitlement to day-one clarity and some further changes to reduce some of the ambiguity between the categories will achieve what the hon. Lady intends.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Generally speaking, this plan is a step forward for workers’ rights in the UK but, as always, it is a war of attrition. I have particular concern about workers who are in distressed enterprises that face closure, many of whom have seen long-standing issues. For example, in my constituency we have heard in the past couple of days the announcement that a railway works that has been in existence since 1856 is threatened with closure, even though it has been through several owners since 2013 and in the process the workers have surrendered so much of their right to their pension entitlements. The works has effectively been asset-stripped by a company
called Knorr-Bremse, which transferred it to a German company, and it then went under the term of a company called Gemini Rail Services.

Will the Secretary of State reflect on the situation facing the workers at that plant, look into the issues facing the heavy maintenance and overhaul of the railway industry in the UK, and undertake to meet me to discuss the particular difficulties faced by the heavy maintenance and overhaul industry in the UK railway sector? Is it facing real crisis. We need to take action to protect those jobs and vital skills, particularly in Springburn in my constituency.

**Greg Clark:** It would obviously not be appropriate for me to comment on that particular case at the Dispatch Box without making myself more familiar with it, but I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, or for one of my colleagues to do so. More generally, the treatment of workers and pensioners in respect of companies in trouble will not be a matter for the Government, but is substantially the responsibility of the Insolvency Service.

That is a far cry from having workers on boards, as the Prime Minister announced some years back. Why is there not a more ambitious and clearer plan to include workers’ voices that would give them the voice that the Prime Minister herself said they would get a few years ago?

**Greg Clark:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to commend Matthew Taylor on the quality of his work and the recommendations. On workforce participation, he will know from his work on the Select Committee that we have introduced reforms that give workers a voice in the boardroom, whether through a dedicated elected director, through a non-executive director who will know from his work on the Select Committee that we have introduced reforms that give workers a voice in the boardroom, whether through a dedicated elected director, through a non-executive director who will have a statutory voice in the boardroom, or through the establishment of a council that can take workforce opinions. The further expansion of consultation included in the plan is another reinforcement of the fact that the more workers are involved in the affairs of their employers, the better it is for productivity.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): In answer to an earlier question, the Secretary of State stressed the importance of access to justice, so will he guarantee today that he will not reintroduce employment tribunal fees?

**Greg Clark:** I think the hon. Lady knows that that is a matter for the Ministry of Justice and the Courts and Tribunals Service, and that I cannot make that commitment from the Dispatch Box. What she can see through the reforms in the plan is that the opportunity to obtain justice and see that enforced, whether through the tribunal system or through employers directly, is substantially advantaged by the plan. I hope she would welcome that.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (West Streeting) just reminded the Secretary of State, when his party first came into power with the Liberal Democrats in 2010, they doubled the length of time that someone had to in employment to be able to claim unfair dismissal protection. In the light of today’s statement, is the Secretary of State looking again at whether that is fair and whether the time should be reduced to the one year that it was under the Labour Government?

**Greg Clark:** Obviously, we keep the standards that we have under constant review. The appointing of a group, under Matthew Taylor’s chairmanship, to consider all aspects of our labour markets and regulation was an open and transparent way to proceed. We are acting on almost every one of his recommendations. They are substantial reforms. I stand by them and I am proud of them.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): It is important to have employment rights, but I would argue that an individual’s ability actually to enact those rights is equally important. The Secretary of State said in his statement that he would give all workers a right to request a more predictable contract, and address the obstacles employees can face in building up continuous service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) just mentioned the increase to two years in the length of time required to get full employment rights. How would someone get their rights enacted if they did not have the two years of service? It is clear that in the real world people will just be sacked if they ask for their rights and have less than two years of employment.

**Greg Clark:** Part of the point of making it a statutory requirement that employers should entertain a request for a more permanent contract is to prevent precisely that kind of abuse. That would be unlawful under the proposals.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is hugely disappointing that the Secretary of State has chosen to maintain state-sponsored age discrimination against workers under the age of 25, who are not entitled even to his pretendy living wage. Is he aware that the age pay gap between a 16 or 17-year-old and a 25-year-old, starting on the same day in the same job, has increased over the past three Budgets? Has he read the report by the Young Women’s Trust, “Paid Less Worth Less?”

**Greg Clark:** The Low Pay Commission has been established to advise, on the basis of rigorous research, what the rates of pay should be for different groups. I am surprised that the hon. Lady does not have the respect for the commission that I have. As we expand the opportunities for young people, especially through apprenticeships, it is important that posts are available for them. It is the commission’s task to advise on what is the best balance between pay and opportunities.
Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): The Secretary of State says that he has gone further than many expected, but he has not gone far enough for the Government’s own Low Pay Commission, which has written to him with a series of recommendations, including that people have the right to regular contracts if they are working regular hours; minimum notice periods for shifts; and compensation for shift cancellations. Why will the Government not commit to those recommendations, instead of their watered-down right to request?

Greg Clark: It is not watered-down. The hon. Lady should see that the changes we are making, including on the ability to request a change from a flexible contract to one that has a fixed number of hours or days, are important reforms. They build on the rights to request, for example, different parental leave, which have proved successful in the past. The hon. Lady should not dismiss reforms that have proved valuable in other contexts.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I welcome this report as a starter. I am a proud Member of this Parliament who pays their intern staff a real living wage—£10 an hour—in a modern MP’s office. The Sutton Trust has found that 70% of all internships taken annually in the UK are unpaid. When will this Government take action to end the scandal and exploitation of unpaid internships? May I also ask that we pay modern wages in this Parliament and in this House for all staff who work here so that we practise what we preach?

Greg Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He will be aware that we are increasing the resources available for the enforcement of the national living wage, and that applies to people who are employed. They may have the description of interns, but if they are performing paid work, they are entitled to the national living wage.
I ask for an emergency debate to be held in order for us to hold this shambolic and chaotic Government to account.

Mr Speaker: I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. Gentleman and I am satisfied that the matter is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. In accordance with Standing Order No. 24(2)(b)(ii), I intend to advise the House at a later hour of this sitting—realistically either at 10 o’clock or, if the business were to lapse earlier, before then—my decision on the time to be allocated for the debate and the time at which the debate should take place. There is good reason for that. For the avoidance of doubt, the particular matter on which the specific and important matter on which the right hon. Gentleman seeks the debate is the outcome of the Prime Minister’s recent discussions with the European Commission and the European Heads of Government regarding the withdrawal agreement and potential ways forward.

As colleagues familiar with these procedures will know, my normal practice, if I grant such a debate, is to specify the time at which it will take place and the intended duration. There is good reason why I am not ready to do so at this time, but I must ask whether the right hon. Gentleman has the leave of the House for his application. The answer is that he does have the leave of the House: no objection has been registered and he has the requisite support. I will advise the House later when the debate will take place and for how long it will last.

Application agreed to.

Digital Economy

Mr Speaker: With the leave of the House, we will debate motions 1, 2 and 3 together. I say that on the assumption that there is no objection. There appears to be no objection, so we will have a single debate for up to 90 minutes. I shall call the Minister to move motion 1 and to speak to all three instruments. Motions 2 and 3 will be moved formally at the end of the debate.

7.5 pm

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): I beg to move,

That the draft Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 10 October, be approved.

Mr Speaker: With this we shall consider the following motions:

That the draft British Board of Film Classification Guidance on Ancillary Service Providers 2018, which was laid before this House on 25 October, be approved.

That the draft British Board of Film Classification Guidance on Age-verification Arrangements 2018, which was laid before this House on 25 October, be approved.

Margot James: The Digital Economy Act 2017 introduced the requirement for commercial providers of online pornography to have robust age-verification controls in place to prevent children and young people under 18 from accessing pornographic material that is made available on a commercial basis.

Section 14(2) of the Act states:

“The Secretary of State may make regulations specifying…circumstances in which material is or is not to be regarded as made available on a commercial basis.”

So, in a sense, this is a small part of the legislative jigsaw needed to implement age verification. It is the last piece. I therefore ask that the draft Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations 2018, and the two pieces of guidance published by the British Board of Film Classification on age-verification arrangements and on ancillary services providers be approved.

I should bring to the attention of the House the concerns of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, which I thank for their work. I will address their concerns in a moment but, before coming to the specific points related to this debate, I remind the House why we are introducing this requirement.

In the offline world, there are strict rules to deter children from accessing adult content. A large amount of pornography is available on the internet in the UK, often for free, with little or no protections to ensure that those accessing the content are old enough to do so.

Julian Knight (Solihull) (Con): This legislation is long overdue and I really welcome it. I ask the House to indulge me for a second. A parent came to my surgery soon after I was elected to discuss how their child had suffered a sexual assault in a school. During the conversation, the mother mentioned to me, at some length, the ready availability of online pornography at school, how this was a motivating factor—or at least a
contributory factor—to the assault and the fact that it just damages our relationships with one another, particularly in young minds.

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for that heartfelt intervention. I am very sorry indeed to hear about that case. There is great validity to the concerns the mother expressed to him.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In the Women and Equalities Committee, as a response to the awfulness of the #MeToo campaign, we took evidence that showed that the consumption of pornography is associated with higher levels of violence, including rape and sexual harassment. I therefore thank my hon. Friend for introducing age verification and for making sure that it works.

Public places are not age specific, and the Committee also suggested that viewing online pornography in public places, such as on buses and trains, should be restricted. Do the Government intend to go further by introducing a restriction on viewing online pornography in public places?

Margot James: I must congratulate the Women and Equalities Committee on its extremely valuable work in this area. It exposed some very concerning issues and backed up its recommendations with evidence. Although the regulations do not touch on the viewing of pornography in public places, we have heard the recommendation of the Committee and what my hon. Friend has just said about that problem. That might be an indirect way of making such material accessible to the very children and young people whom the regulations are designed to help.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I understand that, in 2015, Ofcom said that that was the pivotal time when we switched from people viewing the internet on desktop computers to more people viewing it on handheld devices such as smartphones. The potential for people to view such things inadvertently in public, which has been identified by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), has therefore increased dramatically, as has the potential for children to be exposed to it.

Margot James: I follow my hon. Friend’s logic. That was the conclusion that Ofcom reached. It is definitely worth considering the recommendation that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) have made on reviewing the law on viewing pornography in a public place.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that there is consensus across the House about protecting young people under the age of 18 from illegal or inappropriate material. What steps are being taken to ensure that, in any of the regulations or any of the wider efforts the Government are taking, we do not accidentally prevent young people from accessing age-appropriate material about sex and relationships education? I am aware of material for young lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people on YouTube and other platforms that has been erroneously caught up in age filters and other restrictions. That prevents young people from finding out in a healthy and age-appropriate way about their sexuality and the key things they need to understand as they are growing up.

Margot James: The hon. Gentleman makes some very good points. I am aware of some of the cases to which he refers. When I explain the detail of the regulations, it should reassure him that we are seeking to catch the commercial provision of pornography on sites where at least two thirds of the content is of an adult nature. I think that should allay his concerns. However, we should keep the issue he raises closely under review.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I very much welcome today’s debate and the Government’s proposals, but parents who are listening to this debate may go away with the impression that everything on the internet will be subject to an age barrier. Will the Minister be clearer, for the benefit of parents who are listening, that the regulations will not include social media? What is she doing to ensure that social media platforms do not inadvertently become the way that young people under the age of 15 access pornography in the future?

Margot James: I welcome the intervention from the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee. Let me clarify here and now that the regulations are a very important step forward in preventing children from viewing pornography online. In particular, we are closing the loophole whereby children can stumble across such material inadvertently. However, my right hon. Friend is right that the regulations do not extend to social media platforms that contain pornographic content that is a relatively small minority of the content that they provide. This is not a foolproof guarantee that young people and children will not be exposed to pornography online. It is a significant step forward, but there is, as my right hon. Friend points out, the potential for people to access material on social media platforms, which do not fall within the scope of the regulations unless more than a third of their average content is pornographic.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Margot James: I am sorry that I am taking a long time to answer my right hon. Friend’s point, but it is an important one. I will finish with the last intervention before I take more interventions.

The Government are keeping a weather eye on the availability of pornography on social media platforms. I shall talk more about that, but I reassure my right hon. Friend that we will introduce further measures. My right hon. and learned Friend the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, who is in the Chamber, has a duty to report back on the impact of the regulations 12 to 18 months after their commencement and he will look at just the issues my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) has raised. I will make a little progress before taking further interventions.
There is no doubt, going back to the work of the Women and Equalities Committee, that the large amount of pornography available on the internet in the UK, often for free and with no protections to ensure that those accessing it are old enough to do so, is leading to a change in the way that young people understand healthy relationships, sex and consent. I know that that is a major issue of concern to everybody across the House. A 2016 report commissioned by the Children’s Commissioner and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children made that absolutely clear. More than half of the children sampled had been exposed to online pornography by the age of 15, nearly half of the boys thought that the pornography they had seen was realistic, and just under half wished to emulate what they had seen.

The introduction of a requirement for age-verification controls is a necessary step in tackling those issues and it contributes towards our commitment to make the UK a safer place to be online, particularly for children and young people.

**Maggie Throup** (Erewash) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, when children have such experiences at a very young age, it can affect them for the whole of their life and have a big impact on their relationships as they grow up and get married? Indeed, it can affect not just their relationship with their partner, but their relationships with their children as well.

**Margot James:** I very much agree that, if children see hardcore pornography when they are too young to understand it, it can have long-lasting and very negative impacts on their development and future relationships. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

The draft Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations set out the basis on which pornographic material is to be regarded as “made available on a commercial basis”.

The regulations cover material on websites and applications that charge for access. They also cover circumstances where a person makes available pornographic material on the internet for free, but then receives payment or reward for doing so, for example, through advertising revenue.

It was clear from the debates in this House during the passage of the Digital Economy Act that it was not Parliament’s intention that social media sites on which pornography is only a small part of the overall content should be required to have age verification.

**Neil O’Brien:** As a member of the Science and Technology Committee, I have been involved in our ongoing report on smartphones, social media and young people’s mental health. Absolutely central to that report is the whole issue of age verification for access not just to pornography but to gambling, violent material and things like that. Does the Minister share my strong view that many large social media companies—some of the world’s largest companies, with almost unbelievably sophisticated granular data on their users—have to be raising their game, because they are allowing their own terms of use to be violated, and they know that is happening but are doing nothing about it.

**Margot James:** My hon. Friend raises some important points. We do have rising expectations of social media platforms; we expect at the very least that they enforce their own terms and conditions. Some enforce to a greater extent than others, especially in terms of this particular issue. Facebook takes down posts that include nudity, which is its way of enforcing its own terms and conditions, but what about the private groups that operate on that platform? There is much more to be done. We expect social media platforms to uphold their terms and conditions across their platforms, not just in the public-facing parts of it.

**Rachel Maclean:** My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech dealing with this critical issue that any of us who are responsible for young people will feel very strongly about. Does she agree that there is a rapid evolution in the technology sector? She talked specifically about pornographic sites that charge for access. Will she say a bit more about how she would deal with those sites that offer slightly different business models—for example, the premium model, where it is free to go on to the site and it then captures people’s details and makes them pay a subscription fee later? I am sure that she has considered that as part of her response, so I would be grateful if she could update us on it.

**Margot James:** These regulations will apply even to pornographic sites that make their initial offer free of charge. The rule is that, if a site offering a service where more than 30% of its content is pornographic does so on a commercial basis—which can be free of charge if it is backed up by advertising revenues—it comes within the scope of these regulations, whether or not it provides those services free of charge. These draft regulations will capture such sites as are of concern to my hon. Friend.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I chaired the UK Council for Child Internet Safety for two and a half years. While I applaud the regulations that the Minister is bringing forward, this is scratching the surface. The problem is that these days very few young people pay to access hardcore pornography on the internet. Unless we have some form of verifiable, age-based permission such as the use of a credit card—even if that is not charged for—we are not going to prevent this from happening. Actually, the much bigger problem is on social media, with sexting and everything else that goes on. Social media companies, including ones that we have had in front of the Home Affairs Committee, are turning a blind eye to the hosting of exceedingly dangerous material that young people are accessing and normalising, and then they are transferring that to their relationships during impressionable years. We really have got to do so much better than this.

**Margot James:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work that he has done while chairing that important body, the UK Council for Child Internet Safety. I have already made clear in my answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, the Chair of the Select Committee, that we do recognise that these regulations are a first step. Although we have high expectations of what they can achieve, we are fully aware that they do not go far enough to be able to satisfy...
the vast majority of our concerns where social media platforms are concerned, where the majority of content is not pornographic.

I would like to reassure the House, however, that I do believe that these regulations will be more effective than my hon. Friend fears, because they will cover sites that make pornography available free of charge. As he rightly points out, the majority of young people access pornography without paying for the service. However, if they access it from a site that is predominantly pornographic and is offering a pornographic service on a commercial basis, then, whether it is free of charge or paid for, the regulations will capture both. I would like to reassure him that these regulations will bring into scope the sites about which he is concerned that currently provide these services free of charge.

My hon. Friend will also be reassured to know, when I go on to explain a little more about the actual process of age verification, that it is not simply a matter of being able to offer a credit card. The rigour of age verification provision will be stricter than that. That will also help to counter the growing trend of young people accessing pornography before they attain the age of 18.

Stephen Doughty: Further to the comments by my colleague on the Home Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), we have raised a series of concerns with social media companies and other technology companies about access to inappropriate, violent or extreme content, as well as the content that we are discussing today. Will the Minister and the Government look much more closely at peer-to-peer sharing sites like Snapchat and closed messaging groups on Instagram, Kik and other messaging sites? It is my understanding, from speaking to a lot of young people in my constituency, that that is where a lot of this content is. No age verification goes on, and it is simply done in encrypted sharing. Some of it is self-generated content where people are doing revenge porn, sexting and sharing types of images that not only constitute committing an offence because they are creating child pornography, but are well outside the scope of what one would find on a commercial site. Will she reassure us that serious work will be undertaken to look at that area?

Margot James: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that serious work is being undertaken as we speak, as we prepare the online harms White Paper. We are looking at encryption within the context of that White Paper. He will appreciate the difficulties of privacy versus the public need to reduce the exposure of young people to pornographic material. We are looking at this very seriously. We will be bringing forward the White Paper in the new year and will welcome his input on that.

We have set a threshold of 30% to ensure proportionality where material is made available free of charge. Thus there is an exemption for people making available pornographic content on a website where it makes up under one third of that content. This will ensure that websites that do not derive a significant proportion of their overall commercial benefit from pornography are not regarded in these regulations as commercial pornographic websites. Nevertheless, should a website or app be marketed as making available pornographic material, a person making such material available on that site will be considered to be making it available on a commercial basis even if it constitutes less than one third of the total. This is a proportionate way to introduce the new policy.

I am confident that these measures represent the most effective way to commence this important new policy, but our Department will of course keep it under review. Indeed, as I said, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be reporting on the regulatory framework within 12 to 18 months of commencement of the regulations. In addition, as I just mentioned in response to the hon. Gentleman, the forthcoming online harms White Paper will provide us with another opportunity to review the wider context of this policy.

In conjunction, we have laid two pieces of British Board of Film Classification guidance—first, on age verification arrangements and, secondly, on ancillary service providers. The first piece of guidance sets out the criteria by which the BBFC will assess whether a person has met the requirements of section 14 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 to ensure that pornographic material is not normally accessible to those under 18. The criteria mandate four things: an effective control mechanism at the point of access to verify that a user is aged 18 or over; strict requirements on age verification data; a requirement to ensure that revisits to a site do not permit the bypassing of age verification controls; and the prevention of non-human operators—for example, bots—from exercising the age-verification regime.

Rachel Maclean: Does the Minister believe that the BBFC has sufficient resources and skills to do what the regulations require of it?

Margot James: I would like to reassure my hon. Friend that I certainly think it has the experience, expertise and resources to undertake this role. It has more than a century of experience in the control of film content. It has additional resources and moneys with which it can hold to account age-verification providers and, most importantly, the websites that are providing the pornographic content.

In addition to the criteria that the BBFC will use to verify the effective control of age-verification arrangements, it has provided typical examples of features that it would regard as non-compliant in the arena of age verification.

The second piece of guidance provides a non-exhaustive list of ancillary service providers that the BBFC will consider. That list is not exhaustive, to ensure that the policy remains flexible to future developments. The BBFC has published draft versions of both pieces of guidance and has run a public consultation for four weeks on their content. The draft guidance laid before the House takes account of comments received from affected companies, age-verification providers and other interested parties.

I have been clear that age verification is not a silver bullet, and we know that what we are doing is difficult. Indeed, we are the first country in the world to introduce such a measure. I am aware of the concerns expressed by the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments about the drafting of the Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations 2018. I have considered its concerns carefully, and we are grateful for its work, but we do not
believe that the variation in the legislation between the terms “met” and “applied” will be difficult for a court to interpret.

The Committee expressed concerns about the content threshold because it anticipates difficulty with the application and interpretation of the regulation. As I have said, the regulation will not apply in a case where it is reasonable for the age-verification regulator to assume that pornographic material makes up less than one third of the content of such a site. As stated in the BBFC guidance, the BBFC will seek to engage and work with a person or company who may be in contravention of the requirement in advance of commencing enforcement action.

I am aware that the Committee has also drawn the special attention of both Houses to these draft pieces of guidance because, in its view, they fail to contain the guidance required by section 25(1) of the 2017 Act and contain material that should not have been included. Section 3, paragraph 5, of the age-verification guidance sets out the criteria that the regulator will treat as complying with age verification. The guidance goes on in paragraph 6 to give examples of features that, in isolation, do not comply with the age-verification requirements. That approach ensures fairness and is product-neutral. Rather than recommending a particular solution, the guidance sets out principles that will encourage further innovation.

Neil O’Brien: I wonder whether I could press the Minister on the robustness of age verification, which is of interest to the wider debate. It seems that certain types of checks, such as those that run off a credit card, are extremely robust, but younger people do not have access to credit cards, so that becomes more difficult, although we can layer up different types of information to give a best guess. Of the long list of checks that she has mentioned, which is favourable in terms of robustness and quality?

Margot James: Age-verification providers will have to demonstrate that they have a foolproof system of identifying whether somebody is aged 18 or over. The sort of effective control mechanisms they are considering are credit cards, passports and driving licences—items that a lot of 18-year-olds will have at least one of. My hon. Friend rightly points out that a great deal of work is going on to improve age-verification systems. That is precisely because the sorts of items I have mentioned are, in general, only held by people who are aged 18 or over—with the exception of driving licences, which can be obtained at the age of 17.

For those reasons, it is much more difficult to ascertain how we can require age verification in other areas. For example, in the Data Protection Bill, we set the qualifying age at which someone can consent to a contract with a social media platform as 13, but it is very difficult for someone to prove that they are 13, because those items are normally held by people aged 18 or over.

Eddie Hughes: Should I be concerned by reports that a company called AgeID, which operates the ID verification system for Pornhub and YouPorn, is considering the idea of “porn passes”, which could be bought from a newsagent and would allow people to access porn online anonymously, so that they do not have the embarrassment of their credit cards being recorded against such a site?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): The Minister is being very generous in taking a great many interventions, and I appreciate that she is giving thorough answers to the questions she is being asked, but we only have 58 minutes left, and many Members want to take part in the debate. She might want to bear that in mind.

Margot James: Thank you for your guidance, Madam Deputy Speaker, which I will take on board, but I will just deal with the point raised by my hon. Friend. The measures that will be acceptable to the BBFC will be of greater rigour than the examples he gave. I hope that I will be able to satisfy his concerns, but I may write to him, rather than dwell at length on the important issue he raises.

Now I turn to the guidance on ancillary service providers. Paragraph 3 of section 3 provides a non-exhaustive list of classes of providers that the age-verification regulator may consider as within scope. However, to ensure that this policy remains flexible for the benefit of future developments, it is necessary that this is a non-exhaustive list. Where new classes of ancillary services appear in the future, the BBFC’s guidance explains the process by which these services will be informed.

The guidance includes additional material, as this is a new policy and the regulator considered that it was important for its stakeholders that the guidance set out the wider context in which the age-verification regulator will carry out regulation. This includes valuable guidance on matters such as the BBFC’s approach, powers and material on data protection.

We are aware of the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee’s special interest report. The Committee raised similar concerns to the JCSI—for example, on the content threshold—and the responses to the SLSC’s concerns on these points are the same as the responses we have given to the JCSI reports. However, the SLSC also suggested that the House may want to ask what action the Government will take to tackle pornographic material available on a non-commercial basis. We have already debated these issues during my remarks.

I appreciate that pornography is of course made available by means not covered by the regulations. We have already covered those issues, but they were also the subject of extensive discussion during the passage of the Digital Economy Bill. In particular, concern has been expressed about social media platforms. As I have said in response to hon. Members’ interventions, we expect those platforms to enforce their own terms and conditions and to protect children from harmful content. Indeed, the Government have been clear that online platforms must do more to protect users from such harmful content.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): How do the Government intend to ensure that these regulations can keep up with technological advancements and developments within these markets so that the legislation and regulations this place passes are not obsolete by the time they come into force?

Margot James: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. The principal way in which we are future-proofing these regulations is by making the specificities that the BBFC operates by and the guidance sufficiently flexible and not too prescriptive. As technology advances, it will
be able to adapt such regulations and guidance without the need for this House continually to bring in further legislation.

Before I conclude, I would add in response to my hon. Friend that, as I have said, this is not a silver bullet and it is only one of the measures we are taking. We are working on the online harms Bill to tackle issues and concerns in the area of the provision of pornography that are not captured by these regulations. I trust that my hon. Friend is reassured.

As I have said, I recognise that the age-verification regulations are not a panacea, but I am proud that we are leading the way internationally in the action we are taking to give far more protection to children and young people than is currently available.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Before I call the Opposition spokesman, let me say it will be obvious that many people wish to speak. This debate runs until 8.36 pm and I see people with large wads of notes. It might be helpful for colleagues to know now that they should edit down their notes to some three or four minutes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is a perfectly reasonable point of order, but not now. There was a point when Mr Speaker asked whether the House agreed to take the three matters we are discussing this evening together or separately. At that point, anyone could have objected and each would have been taken separately; thus there would have been a much longer debate, but I am afraid that that moment has passed. However, it is very good, just for once, to have a point of order that is a real point of order, and I thank the hon. Lady for it.

7.44 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I will be as brief as I can, because I know that the whole House will want to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), given the level of expertise she brings to this debate.

The Minister will be pleased that I am able to start on a note of cross-party consensus; we do not have many of those at the moment. I think we can agree across this House that this is an important debate because it gives us the opportunity to say, when it comes to legislation in this territory, that we have rights to honour. We have rights to honour because we have duties to honour—duties to our children. As Baroness Kidron in another place has put it so well, “Children are children until they reach the age of maturity, not until they pick up a smartphone”.

If those duties bite on us, as legislators and indeed as parents, those duties should also bite on companies and indeed on social media companies. These measures go a little distance towards imposing some of those duties on commercial providers. They do not go far enough, and I will explain why there are shortcomings. However, they come so late and are needed so urgently that we will not oppose them or divide the House this evening.

These measures are a stopgap. I hope the Minister will, at some point during these proceedings explain just how long this stopgap is expected to last. At the moment, we have the situation, as the Information Commissioner has put it, that the internet has become something of a “wild west”. As the Minister has been candid enough to admit in her really quite helpful explanatory remarks this evening, these regulations may touch on the problem, but they absolutely do not solve it. We need a very different regulatory approach to the online harms we are seeking to police.

In debating the shortcomings of these regulations, I hope we are able to help the Minister and the Secretary of State, who is good enough to be on the Front Bench tonight, to get two crucial reforms right. We asked for these reforms in the Data Protection Bill. They are the age-appropriate design code, which was promised under the Data Protection Bill, and the internet safety strategy, which I know the Secretary of State is hoping to bring forward as soon as he can get his civil servants back from no-deal planning and get them back on to the Department’s important business.

I hope the Minister is able to set out for us how long she expects this stopgap to last, and I want to flag up to her the 10 obvious deficiencies that leap out from the measures and the explanatory notes to them. I will rattle through them fairly quickly, in the interests of time.

The first problem is the very strange conclusion in the regulations of a de minimis of content at which the regulator will deem it necessary to trigger a safety wall of age-verification software. It is really not clear why a regulator will deem it necessary to trigger a safety wall.

The second problem is the odd definition of “commercial basis” that is used as the trigger for requiring age-verification systems. We have had a useful exchange about business models that entice users by offering free content—the money is made either by advertising or through premium
content. The orders and the explanatory notes are not terribly clear about the sins that will be allowed through the net because of that odd definition.

The third problem, which was debated in the other place, is the challenge of what definition of “obscene material” to use. At least a couple of definitions are knocking around different bits of legislation and it is not clear that the orders are all-encompassing in the definitions used.

That brings us to the fourth issue, which was championed by Baroness Howe in the other place. The definitions that have been used create a couple of important new gaps. I am grateful for the briefing circulated by Christian Action Research and Education, which has set out the challenge in important ways. The Government have changed what the BBFC can ask internet service providers to block from so-called “prohibited material” to the much narrower definition of “extreme pornography”. In so doing, they exclude the power to ask ISPs to block non-photographic, animated child abuse images. Those are illegal to possess under section 62 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 but, at the moment, they are outwith the protections of the orders. If those images are located outside the UK, they are not within the remit of the Internet Watch Foundation. Given the number of such images that we know are available, that is a serious shortcoming in the orders. It is a great concern to the House that neither the Internet Watch Foundation nor the BBFC has the power to deal with those images.

That brings us to the fifth issue. Just as significant is another challenge. Because of the same use of definitions, it is not possible to prohibit violent pornography that is illegal under the Video Recordings Act 1984. I understand that Baroness Howe has a Bill in the other place to step on and do away with these problems, and perhaps at some point we might learn whether the Minister is minded to support that legislation. I am not sure whether the Minister gets a chance to wind up under the rules of tonight’s debate, but she might want to intervene if a box note is forthcoming.

The sixth problem is that the orders give power to what is essentially a private company. When the orders were passed to give the BBFC the role we are debating this evening, the Opposition raised significant concerns about whether, despite its extensive experience, the measures constitute mission creep for the BBFC. The Opposition and other hon. Members have serious doubts about whether it is resourced enough to do the job. This is a new departure in its business, and it does not have a track record. It does not have a royal charter, and it cannot de facto be assumed to be operating in the common good. The basic challenge hon. Members have is this: who will watch the watchmen? How will we ensure that that private organisation, which is blessed by us with statutory powers and statutory regulatory oversight, executes the task we give it effectively? We cannot rely on its mission. I welcome the fact that the Minister says that the Secretary of State will come back to the House in 12 to 18 months with a progress report, but that is rather a long time in the future if the BBFC is found to be seriously failing in the execution of its duties at a much earlier stage.

The seventh problem is that there is not an exhaustive list of age-verification solutions. The Minister will say that the technology moves on and that we need to preserve a degree of flexibility to allow the legislation to keep up to date but, none the less, the lack of specificity worries me. It worries me that the BBFC is not yet able to insist on minimal regulations and solutions for age-verification systems. The eighth problem is that the guidance on what is appropriate in systems is vague.

When we take those eight objections together, we see that the orders are half-measures. The reality is that, this year, we have learned about and debated a great many different approaches to clamping down on the harms that may hurt our children online. A much better approach to the problem would be to use a tried and tested concept in health and safety legislation: the duty of care principle, which has been around in English law since at least the early 1970s. That approach would require companies and organisations to take specific steps to understand the potential harms they are causing to their consumers, and then to take appropriate steps to ameliorate those harms.

If I went to London tonight and built myself an arena and filled it with people, I would rightly be asked to observe all kinds of health and safety measures to ensure that that the people were safe and sound. If I build an online arena, I am under no such obligations and can pretty much do what I want. If I ensure that the arena is a social media platform, I will not be hampered in any way by the orders.

The duty of care principle is a much better approach, but it needs a different kind of regulator. We currently have something like 13 different regulators overseeing different aspects of internet safety, internet regulation, content regulation and financial processing regulation online. That is far too many. That landscape is much too complicated, and those regulators do not have sufficient powers to implement the safeguards against online harm that we as legislators would like. I am not proposing that we reduce those 13 regulators to one this evening, but I am saying that 13 needs to come down to something closer to one. The House needs to ensure that that regulator has the right power to enforce proper duty of care regulation.

The Minister spoke at great length and I am grateful that she took a wide variety of interventions. The orders are important and necessary, and an advance on where we are today, but if we are to get the future right, hon. Members on both sides of the House need to be candid and honest, and work together in identifying the shortcomings of the current approach, which was conceived and constructed in legislation that is a couple of years old. We need to be honest and open about its shortcomings so that we can put in place a better solution when we have the White Paper and, I hope, when the Secretary of State brings the Bill to the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. As I indicated earlier, we will start with a time limit of four minutes.

7.57 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I will curtail my comments to the utmost brevity.

I strongly welcome the regulations, but I have a number of reservations and questions for Ministers. I share the concerns that have been expressed that social media needs to be included in the remit. That is not the case currently despite the fact that 500,000 pornographic
images are posted daily on such platforms. I hope the Minister reassures the House that she will consider that position on social media through the internet safety White Paper.

Secondly, I share the concerns of the JCSI about the Government’s approach to proportionality and the “one third” approach, which might lead to websites deliberately including additional material with the prime intention of falling outside the scope of the regulations. Will Ministers monitor that carefully and consider reviewing the “one third” principle if the concerns expressed by the Joint Committee materialize?

I want to express concerns about the impact of amendments made in another place to part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017, some of which were mentioned by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne). When the Bill left the Commons, it gave the regulator power to block non-photographic child sex abuse images. As we have heard, those images can include incredibly lifelike, animated computer-generated images. Disturbingly, the other place voted to accommodate adult access to such material so long as it is placed behind age-verification checks, but the message that sends is alarming.

As we heard, some suggest that this material could be dealt with by the Internet Watch Foundation, but it can only take action against such material if shown by websites based in the UK. As I have said before in this place, the majority of such material viewed in the UK comes from sites based in other jurisdictions. In 2017, 3,471 reports of alleged non-photographic images of child sexual abuse were made to the IWFS, but none was hosted in the UK and it was unable to act. The Digital Economy Bill, as it left this House, empowered the regulator to take the only credible enforcement action that can be taken against such sites when they are based in other jurisdictions: the regulator had the power to block them. That power has now been taken away, unless a site has no age-verification checks. I hope Ministers will look at that again.

I turn now, with no degree of relish, to the other area of concern, violent pornography, which was reconsidered by the other place. When the Bill left this place, it gave the regulator the power to block violent pornography that is illegal to supply to anyone of any age under the Video Recordings Act 1984. However, amendments introduced in the other place accommodate all but a tiny subset of violent pornography, so long as it is behind age-verification checks. The only illegal content that the regulator can take action against when behind age-verification checks is “extreme pornography” which has to be likely to result in severe injury to certain named body parts. That sends out completely the wrong message about the acceptability of sexual violence against women—it is unacceptable, full stop. I hope Ministers will look at that again.

In conclusion, I support the suggestion that the Government have a quick way to address the two failings to which I have just referred: looking at Baroness Howe’s Digital Economy Act 2017 (Amendment) (Definition of Extreme Pornography) Bill and giving it time for consideration in this place.

8.1 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I believe that all of us in the Chamber tonight want to find common ground and a common way forward. I thank the Minister for her very thorough exposition of the issues in her speech and the Opposition Front Bench spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), for covering a lot of the issues in such detail that I will not need to go over them again. I will keep my remarks very short, so that other Members have the opportunity to participate in the debate.

Currently, it is too easy for our children to access explicit material online. Young people today are growing up in an age where information is readily available to them at the touch of a button. That can be a very good thing, of course, as a terrific aid to learning. However, it also means that children can be exposed to explicit materials either in error or because they are simply curious. We have a duty to ensure that all that can be done should be done to protect them.

Studies have shown that when children and young people are exposed to sexually explicit material, they are at a greater risk of developing unrealistic attitudes about sex and consent; more negative attitudes towards roles, identities and relationships; more casual attitudes towards sex and sexual relationships; and an increase in risky sexual behaviour. They also develop unrealistic expectations of body image and performance. Access to genuine educational material is important, but we must ensure that we take these measures to protect children and young people.

The Scottish National party supports measures that will protect children from exposure to pornographic material online. It is only right that there is a requirement that a person making available pornographic material online on a commercial basis to persons in the United Kingdom should ensure that such material is not normally accessible by persons under the age of 18. As I said in my opening remarks, it is currently too easy for children to access explicit adult content on their phones and computers. There is much work to do, especially in the area of social media, and many challenges listed tonight that are still to be addressed, but we support the measures, which as a start, aim to protect our children in a digital age.

8.4 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I very much welcome this groundbreaking piece of legislation and thank the Minister for going through it so thoroughly today in her opening statement. I think the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) is wrong when he says that this is a set of half-measures, but it is only a start—he is right in that respect. When we look at the scale of the problem we are dealing with, with almost two-thirds of young people seeing pornography online for the first time when they were not expecting it, the Government are right to start the long journey in trying to stop the unexpected exposure to what can be very damaging material.

The Women and Equalities Committee published a number of reports highlighting the damaging impact that exposure to pornography at an early age can have on young children—not only in the report, mentioned
by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), on sexual harassment in public places, but in the report on sexual harassment in school. The evidence is there and it is clear, but rather than going through those findings again I would like to focus particularly on the amendments made in the other place to the Digital Economy Act 2017 (Amendment) (Definition of Extreme Pornography) Bill. They have caused concern not only this evening but outside this place by setting extreme pornography as the threshold for non-compliance and for the images that appear to be allowed as a result of those changes made in the other place.

There are serious concerns about part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017, which has been weakened by Lords amendments. The noble Baroness Howe has been working hard in the other place to try to offer a solution. I hope the Minister can comment on that if time allows this evening. The Lords amendments mean that non-photographic child sexual abuse images, which would be illegal for anybody to possess, could be accommodated behind age-verification checks. Whereas previously the regulator could block that illegal content, the Lords amendments mean that that could happen only if the material was without age verification.

Secondly, the Lords amendments mean that a lot of violent pornography that is illegal to supply to anyone of any age under the Video Recordings Act 1984 will now be accommodated behind age verifications. That sends out all the wrong messages, so will my hon. Friend confirm that the Government will be not only keeping these issues under close review, but examining whether they could take forward the recommendations in Baroness Howe’s Bill, and that these issues can be addressed directly in the online harms White Paper, if not before?

We have the opportunity to return to these issues after 18 months, but I would not want to see what is a good start being hampered by changes in the other place that ComRes polling would suggest almost three-quarters of Members in this place simply would not agree to. Why can we not bring forward measures that would better reflect the will of this House, rather than that of unelected peers? The Front Bench spokespeople would better reflect the will of this House, rather than agreeing to. Why can we not bring forward measures that are much to learn from other countries?

Secondly, the Lords amendments mean that a lot of violent pornography that is illegal to supply to anyone of any age under the Video Recordings Act 1984 will now be accommodated behind age verifications. That sends out all the wrong messages, so will my hon. Friend confirm that the Government will be not only keeping these issues under close review, but examining whether they could take forward the recommendations in Baroness Howe’s Bill, and that these issues can be addressed directly in the online harms White Paper, if not before?

We have the opportunity to return to these issues after 18 months, but I would not want to see what is a good start being hampered by changes in the other place that ComRes polling would suggest almost three-quarters of Members in this place simply would not agree to. Why can we not bring forward measures that would better reflect the will of this House, rather than that of unelected peers? The Front Bench spokespeople often tell me that something that is illegal offline is illegal online as well. They are really close to the edge of breaking their own rule, where things that are actually illegal offline appear to the normal man on the Clapham omnibus to have a different effect online. That is really regrettable.

The Minister was very generous in responding to my earlier comments on social media. I hope she keeps under review the need to put much pressure on social media companies to ensure that they also are within these sorts of parameters.

8.8 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I will rattle through some points, because I would like them to be on the record for the Minister and the Secretary of State.

On the guidance on the ancillary service providers, under section 151(1)(d) of the Digital Economy Act 2017 and annex one of the guidance, pornography material is defined as a video work or material that has been issued an 18 certificate and that it is reasonable to assume from its nature was produced solely or principally for the purposes of sexual arousal.”

This is a neutral definition that fails to recognise that porn is almost always coercive, usually violent, aggressive and degrading, and is gendered. It is also almost always men doing it to women. Other countries are broad in their definition of pornography, to capture that aspect of it. In Spain, it is defined as “pornography, gender violence, mistreatment”, and in Poland as very strong and explicit violence, racist comments, bad language and erotic scenes. Does the Minister agree that our definition could be amended to acknowledge that pornography represents gendered violence, misogyny and abuse?

Liam Byrne: Am I right that the point my hon. Friend wants to register this evening is that there is much to learn from other countries?

Sarah Champion: That is absolutely right, and that becomes more apparent as we go forward. This legislation is very UK-based; pornography, of course, is international.

Minister, I am very concerned about the ability of the BBFC to compel ancillary service providers and payment-service providers to block access to non-compliant pornography services, as described under sections 21 and 23 of the Digital Economy Act. What power does the BBFC have to force companies to comply with its enforcement measures? What happens if credit card companies, banks or advertising agencies refuse to comply? I know of pornographic sites that accept supermarket points instead of cash to get around such legislation from other countries. What assessment has the Minister made of the likelihood of opportunistic websites being established to circumvent UK legislation and the child protection risks that follow? It is unclear how the BBFC will appraise sites and what review mechanisms it will put in place to judge whether the scheme is effective in practice.

Under part 1, paragraph 10 of the guidance:

“The BBFC will report annually to the Secretary of State”.

Will the Minister commit to an interim review after six months from the implementation date, so that we can see whether this is working? Under part 1, paragraph 11 of the guidance,

“the BBFC will… carry out research… into the effectiveness of the regime”

with a view to child protection “from time to time”. As that is the very purpose of the legislation, does the Minister agree that this should occur at least every two years? Under part 2, paragraph 7 of the guidance,

“the BBFC will… specify a prompt timeframe for compliance”.

However, there is no detail on what this timeframe is. It could be a week—it might be a year. Will the Minister please explain the timetable for enforcement?

The guidance also details the enforcement measures available to the BBFC in the case of a non-compliant provider. I broadly welcome those enforcement measures, but I am concerned about the ability of the BBFC to take action. Will the Minister tell us which body will be effectively enforcing these punishments? Will it be the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport or the Home Office? Will the Minister put on the record
the additional resources being committed both to the BBFC and whichever Government agent is meant to enforce the legislation?

Turning to the BBFC guidance on age-verification arrangements, I want to register my concerns about the standards laid out on what constitutes sufficient age verification from providers. Section 3, paragraph 5 mentions “an effective control mechanism at the point of registration or access by the end user which verifies that the user is aged 18 or over at the point of registration or access”.

That is very vague and could in practice mean any number of methods, many of which are yet to be effectively put to the test and some of which may jeopardise the security of personal data. That raises concerns about the robustness of the whole scheme, so will the Minister detail how she plans to ensure that the qualifying criteria are not so lax as to be useless?

Part 4, paragraph 3a states that “age-verification systems must be designed with data protection in mind—ensuring users’ privacy is protected by default”.

Has the Minister also made an assessment of the safeguarding implications for the personal data of children, some of whom may attempt to falsify their age to access pornographic imagery? Following the data hack of Ashley Madison, that has concerning implications for adults and children alike. While age verification certainly is not a silver bullet, as an idea it does have a place in a regulatory child protection framework. However, we need to ensure that that framework is as robust as it can be. Guidelines for websites that host pornographic material must be clear, so that the policy can be rigorously applied and potential loopholes are closed.

I also want to say that this has to work across Government. At the moment, we are still waiting for the Department for Education to bring forward the guidance on relationship and sex education. Unless we prevent, we cannot—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

8.13 pm

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): I knew that parliamentarians on both sides of the Chamber agree that we have a duty to provide the framework to protect those who are unable to protect themselves. That is why I welcome the legislative steps to implement the age-verification controls that we are talking about tonight. That is especially the case since I have read some of the evidence, although that also made me question whether we are going far enough—a question on all our lips tonight.

The survey carried out on behalf of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children’s Childline service showed that one in five children aged between 11 and 17 said that they had seen pornographic images that had shocked or upset them. That is why this legislation is so important.

We have talked about technology and how fast-moving it is, and that can work both ways. It could perhaps help us to provide stronger controls if we grasp what may happen in the coming months and make sure that we use the technology to the fullest. However, we must also be aware that technology can advantage the online providers of the pornography that we are trying to prevent our young people from seeing. It is important that we keep up to date with what is happening in the technology world. As others have said, the measures should be the starting point, not the end point. I would really appreciate it if the Minister clarified what further steps were being taken to make sure that we moved forward with this over the coming months and years.

The key focus of what we are discussing is that children should be protected online in the same way as they are offline. We have other prohibitions for goods that are inappropriate for different ages, such as tobacco and alcohol—to me, this is an extension of those principles. It is right that we look at how to protect children and young people from inappropriate online images.

There has been a lot of talk tonight about social media and how the legislation does not cover that. Hopefully, some of the responsible providers of social media are watching and listening and, through the nudge effect, will be able to implement good practices based on the new regulations that we are introducing for online providers. We know that the nudge principle works in other areas, so perhaps we can keep an eye on that as well to make sure that we take every possible advantage from what we are discussing across all the different platforms.

It is also important that we do not forget about parental responsibility, because that is still a big way of stopping children seeing inappropriate images. When I was talking to a colleague earlier, she said that as parents she and her partner thought that they had done the right thing by putting the computer in the hallway so that they were walking past all the time, but such actions do not stop parents going out and leaving children at home as young adults. Whatever parents do, sometimes it is not enough, which is why I welcome these measures.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) mentioned that what we are doing might be misunderstood by parents, who may feel that they do not need to provide any parental guidance. We need to make sure that parents still understand that they have that responsibility and that the legislation and framework being put in are not a panacea, but the start of a long pathway to making sure that we protect our children from pornography and that they develop healthy, strong relationships and are not affected by what they see as children.

8.17 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I will keep my remarks brief not only because of the time available, but because many of the concerns that the Liberal Democrats share have been covered, particularly by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), who spoke from the Opposition Front Bench.

On behalf of the Liberal Democrats, I would like to oppose these flawed—as we see it—Government plans for age verification for access to online pornography. Ostensibly, as we have heard tonight, the main aim of the proposals is to stop children stumbling on to online pornography, but there is little supporting evidence that young people do stumble upon these sites. If they do, it is more likely that they are not the dedicated sites that would be covered by the legislation.
That is one flaw, but my main objection is that the Government’s proposals would mean tracking information from people using these sites by suggesting that a credit card or an address is given to check against the electoral register. An act that is private and, in most cases where the information is asked for, legal, would be recorded and could be tracked on the person’s computer. On top of that, there are concerns about the lack of privacy protections, that the information could be open to hacking and that, like any other bulk data, it could be sold on.

The legislation is also easy to circumvent. Indeed, US websites have already said that they will simply ignore it because, to their mind, it interferes with legal independence and the rights of the individual. However, my main concern is that this flawed legislation could lead to the targeting of sexual minorities who are over 18 and can visit the sites. Some members of the LGBT community may wish to keep their identity or their sexuality secret for several reasons, but the legislation would risk the possibility of their being hacked and that information being leaked. In a nutshell, those are the reasons why Liberal Democrat Members oppose the Government’s proposals.

8.21 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this important debate, and to be part of a debate in which several thoughtful points have been made from hon. Members of all parties.

We should be proud of the legislation that we are introducing. As the Minister said, it is the first time that something like this has been attempted anywhere in the world. Although we could undoubtedly go further, this is a noble first step. I spent the first part of my career as a teacher. I worked for Barnardo’s and for the Office of the Children’s Commissioner and I followed this issue closely through those jobs.

I have been struck by the sheer pace of change and Governments’ and regulators’ failure to keep up with it. The speed with which smartphone technology has changed the environment of childhood is frightening. I have always been wary of the aggressive online libertarian wing, which claims that this new world cannot be regulated and that to introduce any form of restriction is to inhibit the beauty of the online liberal space. That is one flaw, but my main objection is that the Government’s proposals would mean tracking information from people using these sites by suggesting that a credit card or an address is given to check against the electoral register. An act that is private and, in most cases where the information is asked for, legal, would be recorded and could be tracked on the person’s computer. On top of that, there are concerns about the lack of privacy protections, that the information could be open to hacking and that, like any other bulk data, it could be sold on.

The legislation is also easy to circumvent. Indeed, US websites have already said that they will simply ignore it because, to their mind, it interferes with legal independence and the rights of the individual. However, my main concern is that this flawed legislation could lead to the targeting of sexual minorities who are over 18 and can visit the sites. Some members of the LGBT community may wish to keep their identity or their sexuality secret for several reasons, but the legislation would risk the possibility of their being hacked and that information being leaked. In a nutshell, those are the reasons why Liberal Democrat Members oppose the Government’s proposals.

8.24 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to speak in support of the regulations and guidance, although I want to register some concerns. I thank Dan Boucher from Christian Action Research and Education—CARE—who gave us some information about the subject.

It is two years since the Digital Economy Bill left our House, yet the age-verification provisions have still not been implemented. Will the Minister assure us that there will be no further slippage in the timetable? I want to put on record my thanks to the Minister and her Parliamentary Private Secretary, who usually sits behind her, but not tonight—it is a different person—for their courtesy and good manners in helping us to look at the issues, and giving us an assurance, which I am holding on to, that the White Paper will make the necessary changes.

As things stand, neither part 3 of the Digital Economy Act 2017 nor the regulations engage with social media. That point was made in another place last month with real concern. It was pointed out that a staggering 500,000 pornographic images are posted on Twitter every day. I gently remind the Minister that the recent Women and Equalities Committee report on sexual harassment recommended:

“The definition of ‘commercial pornography services’ for the Government’s policy on age verification of pornography websites should be amended to include social media”.

We should be mindful of that recommendation. I hope that the Minister will reassure the House that she is considering the Act’s position on social media as part of her reflections on the White Paper. We need action. Parents are no less troubled by the prospect of their children seeing online pornography because it is on Twitter rather than a website, and neither should we be.

I also gently remind the Minister that the Conservative party manifesto said that “we will stop children’s exposure to harmful sexualised content online, by requiring age verification for access to all sites containing pornographic material.”

My only worry is about the caveat that states that, if pornography makes up only a third of the content on the site, it does not count. Again, I seek reassurance about that. I also ask the Minister how the Government can justify protecting children from pornographic material online only in certain circumstances, when their manifesto commitment contained no hint of any qualification or limitation on their age-verification checks strategy.

When the Digital Economy Bill left the Commons, the regulator was empowered to block all non-photographic child sex images, regardless of age verification. That made complete sense because section 62 of the Coroners...
and Justice Act 2009 makes it absolutely clear that it is a
criminal offence for anyone of any age, including anyone
over 18, to possess such material. However, in the other
place, amendments were introduced to accommodate
the wishes of adults. I am ever mindful that some 71% of MPs—parliamentarians in this House—want
stronger protection, and I know that the Minister wants
that, too. I suggest that this must urgently be rectified.

Similarly, when the Bill left the Commons, the regulator
had the power to block, regardless of age verification,
all violent pornography that it would be a criminal
offence to supply to anyone of any age, including those
aged 18 and above, under the Video Recordings Act 1984.
That is no longer the case. The Digital Economy Act
cannot send out the message that the normalisation of
sexual violence against women is worth accommodating.
Of course I understand that, under section 29, there will
be scope for these issues to be reviewed between 12 and
18 months after implementation.

The Digital Economy Act 2017 (Amendment) (Definition
of Extreme Pornography) Bill was tabled in the other
place—by Baroness Howe—and, during last week’s debate
on these regulations a number of peers pressed the
Government to give the Bill time. It is notable that,
rather than saying no, the Minister, Lord Ashton, undertook
to speak to the Chief Whip, and I very much hope that
the Minister in this House will do the same. I congratulate
her on tabling the motions, and I look forward to our
working together to make this stronger, because that is
what we all want.

8.28 pm

Margot James: With the leave of the House, Mr Deputy
Speaker, I thank the right hon. Member for Birmingham,
Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) for his support for the regulations.
I agree with him that—as I said in my opening remarks—
they are a contribution to the greater security of children
and young people online, but, as I think the whole
House agrees, they are not a total solution.

The right hon. Gentleman asked what further steps
we were taking, and asked about their timings. I reassure
him that the Secretary of State will review the performance
of the regulations within 12 to 18 months of their
taking effect. As part of that review, and in response to
the deep concern that has been expressed by many
Members in all parts of the House this evening about
the extreme nature of pornography, we will look at the
fact that this being behind age verification should not be
a licence for the production of that sort of material.
The Secretary of State will also be empowered to reconsider
the definitions of extreme pornography. I thank him for
remaining in the Chamber throughout the debate. I am
sure that he has noted the will of the House that we revisit
those definitions, which do not appear to me to be fit for purpose.

A White Paper on online harms will be published
early in the new year. The right hon. Gentleman raised
the issue of the desirability of placing a duty of care on
social media platforms, which are relevant to the debate
and which have a far wider impact than the issue that
we are debating tonight. I reassure him that we are
considering a duty of care as part of the development
of that White Paper. I look forward to his further
contributions on how to make such a duty effective in
this context.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona
Bruce) mentioned the risk that pornographic sites would
flood themselves with non-pornographic material in
order to evade the scope of the regulations. We have
considered that. My Department and the British Board
of Film Classification have held discussions with commercial
providers of pornography sites, and we have encountered
a great willingness on the part of those operators to fall
in line with age-verification measures. Indeed, they are
setting up arrangements to do so. We consider it unlikely
that sites will go to the trouble of being flooded with
non-pornographic content but, if we turn out to be
over-optimistic on that front, my hon. Friend can be
assured that that would weigh heavily with the Secretary
of State when he reviews the operation of the regulations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), the Chair of the Women and Equalities
Committee, mentioned the Lords amendments that had
facilitated the availability of extreme pornography involving
violence, and even involving children, if generated via
technology as opposed to human actors. That strikes
me as a grotesque loophole. I agree with my right hon.
Friend and others that Baroness Howe’s Bill, which
seeks to render this activity illegal, is worthy of our
consideration, and I commit the Government to considering
it as a potential means of combating that sickening
loophole.

The hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion),
who has huge expertise in this area, mentioned the
predominantly coercive, violent and gendered basis of
the grotesque abuse of women in much of the content,
and the effect that that could have on the minds of
young people as they develop into adulthood. Let me
reassure her, as I reassured my right hon. Friend the
Member for Basingstoke, that we will definitely consider
her comments. She made a number of worthwhile
suggestions, and I will write to her, as time does not
permit me to go through all of them in turn.

I am sure I was not alone in my surprise when the
hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine)
declared that the Liberal Democrats would oppose the
regulations, on the broad basis that they do not go far
e enough. I think that the rest of the House agrees that
they do not yet go far enough in tackling the problem
before us. She must agree, however, that certain aspects
of this are very difficult. Tackling pornographic content
on a site like Twitter is very difficult, because to introduce
a blanket ban on anyone under the age of 18 accessing a
social media platform of that nature would have serious
unintended consequences. We need to get these matters
right and, rather than the Liberal Democrats just opposing
these measures, they would do well to contribute to the
debate. I urge the hon. Lady’s party to reconsider its
position, which, if unchanged will lead it into disrepute.

I am grateful for the comments from the hon. Member
for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He reminds me of my
party’s manifesto commitment to end the access of
children and young people to pornography sites. I agree
with him that we need to go further, but I commend
these regulations to the House as a very good start and I
thank hon. Members for their support this evening.
8.36 pm

One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the motion, the Speaker put the Question (Standing Order No. 16(1)).

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Online Pornography (Commercial Basis) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 10 October, be approved.

DRAFT BRITISH BOARD OF CLASSIFICATION GUIDANCE ON ANCILLARY SERVICE PROVIDERS 2018

Resolved,

That the draft British Board of Classification Guidance on Ancillary Service Providers 2018, which was laid before this House on 25 October, be approved.—(Margot James.)

DRAFT BRITISH BOARD OF CLASSIFICATION GUIDANCE ON AGE-VERIFICATION ARRANGEMENTS 2018

Resolved,

That the draft British Board of Classification Guidance on Age-Verification Arrangements 2018, which was laid before this House on 25 October, be approved.—(Margot James.)

Mr Speaker: We come now to a series of potentially deferrable motions: motions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9. Not moved.

8.37 pm

Speaker’s Statement

Mr Speaker: I indicated to the House earlier in response to the application under Standing Order No. 24 that I would advise the House before the end of the sitting if at all possible of the start time and intended duration of the debate under that Standing Order secured by the parliamentary leader of the Scottish National party. The reason why I gave what might be described as a contingent ruling or judgment was that I was awaiting advice from another quarter in respect of a separate but important matter. That advice has not to date been forthcoming, and therefore I have to make a judgment on the basis of what is known to me now. I am sorry if this sounds rather abstruse, but I think it will be clear at any rate to those who have sought tomorrow’s or Wednesday’s debate. In the absence of clarification on the other matter that was being considered for possible attention of the House, I propose that the debate under Standing Order No. 24 shall take place tomorrow at the start of public business, and that it shall last for up to three hours. If subsequent to now there is any intelligence suggesting that that arrangement could usefully be revisited, of course the party that has secured the debate will be advised of that and given the opportunity to consider an alternative time if it so wished, and we would try to proceed by consensus. But as things stand I propose that that debate in the name of the Scottish National party should take place as the first item of public business tomorrow for up to three hours. I hope that that is helpful to colleagues.
Kayden Dunn

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

8.38 pm

**Ruth Smeeth** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I should start by saying that due to personal events the family cannot be here with us tonight, but they are watching.

I am here today to tell a tragic story, one that I sincerely wish had never happened, but nevertheless it is a story that needs to be told, even at this time of year. It is a story of loss, of a family let down by our criminal justice system and of a community united in grief.

At the heart of this story is a wonderful little boy named Kayden Lee Dunn. Kayden was a happy, healthy little boy with a huge personality, big blue eyes and a laugh his mum said could “fill the world with joy.” His mum, Tonie, has told me that when she first held him and stared into those big, shiny blue eyes, she tried to imagine the perfect future for her little boy. She thought about what his life might hold and the role he might play in the world he had just come into. Perhaps he would grow up to be a policeman, a footballer or even a dancer. Whatever the future might hold, Tonie knew that she would always be proud of Kayden and that he would always make her proud.

Kayden was full of energy, and he loved to learn. At the age of three, he would play games on his way to nursery with his mum, trying to spot shapes in the clouds or count how many cars there were of each colour. Red was his favourite. He loved going to school, too. In his last few months of year 2, he was engrossed in his lessons about knights and castles. Learning his lines that would come up again and again with his family. Whenever Kayden wanted to know how much his mum loved him, that was always her answer: “To the moon and the stars.”

To Kayden’s family, it is fitting that we should be having this debate in the week before Christmas, because this was his favourite time of year. He would spend all afternoon on his trampoline shouting, “Mommy, I’ve done 250 bounces; I’m shattered,” was gone—taken—but, as heartbreaking as that is, it got even worse. This family, who had already lost their child, would be denied justice, too. After pleading guilty to causing death by careless driving, the perpetrator was sentenced to 12 months—just 12 months for a life.

This was a tragedy beyond measure for Kayden’s family and friends. He was a bubbly, blue-eyed little boy. His mum said he was cheeky, full of joy and brought a smile to everyone’s face. In an instant, this treasured son and brother, this bundle of energy who brought a smile to everyone’s face. In an instant, this treasured son and brother, this bundle of energy who had broken several of them. Shortly after his release, he demonstrated an absence of remorse. Following his release, Kayden’s killer was handed a number of conditions and has broken several of them. Shortly after his release, he was jailed for a further 12 weeks after being caught behind the wheel of a car in defiance of a driving ban. He is not supposed to make contact with the family, yet he approached them in a local convenience store just before he returned to prison.

The family have also seemingly fallen through the cracks with the probation service. The family were informed that it would organise a victims meeting, so that Kayden’s family could confront the perpetrator in a safe environment and have the chance to express what his actions had done to them, the impact on their family and their complete devastation. However, such a meeting never materialised, despite the promises of the probation service at the time. To lose a child, especially at such a young age, is to endure a wound that never heals. For the family to see the perpetrator treated so leniently and
to be made to feel in secure in their own community is to have salt rubbed into that wound in the cruellest way possible. My constituents have been let down by the Crown Prosecution Service, which failed to secure a punishment befitting the crime, and by the probation service, which seems uncommitted to enforcing the conditions that were still in place to protect this grieving family.

In October 2017, the Government announced that the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving would be raised from 14 years to life imprisonment. That was the right decision and I welcome it, but it came too late for Kayden’s family and it will fail to deliver justice in future unless prosecutors pursue charges that fit the crime and do not reduce such heinous acts to the lighter charge of death by careless driving. We do not just need the right sentencing guidelines; we need to ensure that the right charge is brought in the first place.

While our institutions may have failed on this occasion, our community stepped up. I have already mentioned the thousands who supported the campaign for justice for Kayden, but that is nothing compared with the extraordinary outpouring of love and support in Sneyd Green and beyond in my great city of Stoke-on-Trent. Thousands of pounds have been raised and a permanent memorial to Kayden can now be found in the heart of the community where he went to school and where his family still live. In the midst of that good will and kindness, Kayden’s family decided to give something back to the community.

Throughout this awful period, Kayden’s family have spoken glowingly about the care that Kayden received at the hands of our NHS and the support that was there for the family in their darkest hour—the air ambulance staff, the emergency NHS practitioners, the police, the school, the residents’ association and the wider community. To thank the community, the family launched the Kayden Dunn memorial fund, and one of their first acts was to raise funds to donate parcels for families who will unfortunately have similar experiences to theirs, encouraging people to donate the vital items that families need in times of unexpected crisis, such as toothpaste, shower gel and clean underwear, to Birmingham Women’s and Children’s hospital to ensure that those essentials will be available for other families.

I am immensely proud to represent a place where such care and community spirit exist, and I am honoured to represent this family who have endured so much and shown such courage in the face of tragedy. My speech to this House is nearly over, but there is no end to this story for Kayden’s family. The pain of losing a loved one never leaves; we simply learn to bear it. In this instance, that pain is made worse by the knowledge that justice has not been delivered, but this family is inspirational, and their new daughter, Angel, has helped them survive and thrive together.

However, we will not forget that the man who stole Kayden’s life has been allowed to go with his own without serving an adequate punishment for his crime and without showing any genuine remorse for his actions. His sentence was a affront to justice and an insult to a suffering family. It is too late to change that, too late to bring Kayden back and too late to hold those who took him from us to account, but it is not too late to learn the lessons of this case and to apply them to try to ensure that no other family will have to suffer the way that this family has.

Words cannot give Kayden Dunn his life back, but they can honour and preserve his memory. While his life was all too brief, they can ensure that his name and his memory will live on long after us through the records of this place. In that spirit, I believe that the final words should not belong to me, but to Kayden’s mum, Tonie. In her eulogy for little Kayden, she said:

“I miss him so much. I wrote this so you could all have an insight into my boy’s life, not to upset you but to show you how proud I am of my baby, and to show you what a beautiful impact he had on our lives. Memories will never fade and I’ll always be grateful for my little blue-eyed boy.”

8.50 pm

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) for securing this debate. This is a genuinely horrifying case, and I hope I will be able slightly to express our debt of gratitude to her and to Kayden Dunn’s family for bringing this case to the House.

It begins, of course, as a terrible personal story of a little boy. Anybody looking at the photographs or hearing the hon. Lady talk about Kayden on a trampoline or in his school play will feel the horror of what happened, which is something that has ramifications for all our lives, whether or not we are parents. I am the father of a four-year-old boy and an 18-month-old boy, and I think of such incidents every time I go to the road. All of us, in different ways, will reflect on this, and I hope that all of us will reflect on the justice system and on driving.

At the heart of this is the crime committed by a young man at the wheel of a car, which led to something so horrifying as the loss of a young life. It raises for us a couple of issues that I hope to touch on before I conclude. First, the Ministry of Justice must take some practical steps to learn from Kayden Dunn’s case. The hon. Lady specifically raised the case of the probation service and what we can do on restorative justice. Restorative justice is hugely important, and it can really help the business of healing and it can really help a family, like Kayden’s family, come to terms with somebody who has committed such a crime. There have been delays in this case and, as we have explained to Kayden’s mother, part of it is due to her personal family circumstances. I believe a meeting has now taken place—on 16 November—and we will now reach out to her again to see whether there is more we can do to facilitate this.

The broader question of law, moving from the probation service to sentencing, is very important. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, there is the broader issue of how we deal with people who cause death by their actions in a motor car. We all need to remember the fundamental fact that a motor car is, in effect, a lethal weapon: it is tonnes of metal, with a powerful engine, travelling at a very great speed.

The awful truth is that recent statistics suggest that 25% of young men aged between 17 and 21 have a car crash. That is 25% of young men aged between 17 and 21 at the wheel of this lethal weapon driving carelessly or dangerously.
Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My heart goes out to Kayden’s family. Sadly, what we have heard tonight is not an isolated incident. The Minister talks about a car being a lethal weapon and anybody else killing somebody with a lethal weapon would be charged with murder. Will there be any steps to change the law to make the lethal weapon of a car being driven dangerously murder?

Rory Stewart: That is probably the central question in this whole debate. The answer, of course, is that, in terms of the loss of life, it is like murder. The act has killed someone, and that life can never be given back. The difference between murder and this, of course, is in the intention of the individual, which is a very difficult thing to talk about. English law traditionally distinguishes between somebody intentionally trying to kill someone, and somebody whose acts, through recklessness in this case, have resulted in a death. One reason why we are moving to increase the penalty for causing death by dangerous driving to a life sentence is that we believe strongly that this is, if not quite murder, indistinguishable in effect from manslaughter.

There are two types of manslaughter—illegal act manslaughter and gross negligence manslaughter. We could argue that somebody at the wheel of a car killing somebody else either by speeding or drink-driving, which would be an unlawful act, or simply by driving dangerously, is breaching their duty of care to other road users. Their recklessness lies in the fact that they ought to be aware, or any reasonable person would be aware, that their actions had a high likelihood of resulting in death.

There are also things we need to do on the broader issue of road safety that do not relate directly to Kayden Dunn’s case but which are important for future cases. Some good campaigns have been run in this House drawing attention to how vulnerable cyclists and pedestrians can be. Tragically, Kayden is one of almost 440 pedestrians killed this year in the UK by motor cars.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I very much welcome the debate and the fact that causing death by dangerous driving will attract a life sentence. Will the Minister say more about what will happen in cases where the result is not death but serious injury? What sentence will that attract?

Rory Stewart: The case of serious injury is another thing we have been reviewing, and we are currently looking at that issue from different directions. We have been looking at increasing the penalty for causing death by dangerous driving. Secondly, we have been looking at increasing the penalty for causing death by careless driving when under the influence of drink or drugs. We have been looking at the issue of causing injury and the position of vulnerable road users, in particular, cyclists, of whom more than 100 are killed a year, pedestrians, of whom about 450 are killed a year, and even people on horses, of whom nearly 40 are killed a year. My hon. Friend asked about injuries, and the answer is that such a case would attract a two or three-year maximum sentence, but that is something we are examining.

I do not wish to take up too much of the House’s time, because Kayden Dunn’s case is so horrifying, and so personal to Kayden’s family and to the community in Stoke, that I almost feel it is slightly inappropriate for me, as a Minister, to reduce it to the language of the Chamber or of a policy debate. However, the issue of road safety matters to us all, and Kayden Dunn’s case gives us an opportunity to reflect on that. The truth is that in 1926 4,800 people were killed gross negligently in accidents in Britain. By 1966, the number had risen to 8,000, whereas this year 1,700 people were killed. So our roads are getting safer and fewer people are getting killed. Obviously, in 1926, when more than twice as many people were killed, there were far fewer cars on roads, but 1,700 people is still far, far too many. That needs not only a legal response—it needs proper judicial sentencing and punishment for people who break the law and kill people—but practical steps. It requires us to look closely at the driving test and at whether people should be re-tested. It requires us to look at the position of professional drivers, as, sadly, quite a lot of injuries are caused by people whose jobs lead them to drive unusual numbers of hours. It leads us to look at road design, what happens on the streets and the way we set out the markings. It leads us to think about road safety campaigns for children in schools. It leads us to think about road safety for cyclists, about protective gear for cyclists and, of course, about motorcyclists, who are currently probably the second most vulnerable group on the road.

None of that can take us away from the individual case, so let me finish by saying again that the case of Kayden Dunn has been an opportunity for us all in the House to reflect, over a serious half hour, on the horror and the tragedy that lies behind the language of our law. Too often, here, we have pieces of paper and talk in an abstract way. We forget the real people—the real victims—and the fact that when somebody is killed, there is not a single victim; the ripples of that death spread through an entire family and then through an entire community.

By courageously working with her Member of Parliament to bring this case to Parliament, Kayden’s mother has made several things happen. First, to learn from Kayden’s tragic death, we must improve road safety in any way we can. Secondly, we have to look at our justice system and think about the ways in which that system is fair and whether it addresses the question of the impact of a person’s act on a victim, and balances that with questions of loss and remorse. One question raised in the debate was whether the young man who was driving the car felt the appropriate remorse. It is right that in our legal system the showing of remorse or lack of remorse can act as a mitigating or aggravating factor in the determination of the length of a sentence. That leads us back to the broader issue around extending the maximum penalties.

In the end, the tribute has to go back to Kayden Dunn and his family—back to that little glimpse of a young boy on a trampoline, to a glimpse of a young boy at a school play. There was also a glimpse of another young man. God forbid that we judge another human being, but perhaps we can move on from the case and all reflect on this when we get behind the wheel of a car. The car is a weapon and, whenever we get into it, it could kill someone—it could kill a young child. If any of us thinks of speed in a residential area or, God forbid, thinks of getting into a car uninsured or driving without a licence, we are acting with such gross negligence and such recklessness that it must be equated morally with the most criminal or grossly negligent acts that we commit.
I hope we can take away from this debate the beauty of that young man's life and a strong sense from this Chamber going out to society that we will remember Kayden Dunn with enormous, sincere respect for him and his family and for the way they have reached out to Parliament. We should also take away the hope that in future, there will not be many more Kayden Dunns.

Question put and agreed to.

9.3 pm

House adjourned.
The Secretary of State was asked—

**Legal Advice: Workplace Injuries**

1. Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that workers can access legal advice on workplace injuries. [908244]

2. Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to ensure that workers can access legal advice on workplace injuries. [R] [908248]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I believe that the hon. Gentleman is referring to our proposal to raise the small claims limit for employees’ personal injury claims to £2,000. That change is not only in line with inflation, but will give those affected the opportunity to be heard in an uncomplicated, accessible court, without the need for a lawyer if they so choose.

Lucy Frazer: The Ministry of Justice always ensures that it brings measures to the House in a way that is appropriate for them. Of course this measure will have scrutiny; statutory instrument procedure involves the scrutiny of the House. This measure will ensure that people can access the courts in an accessible way, without the need to spend excessive amounts of money.

Jo Stevens: I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I listened carefully to what the Minister just said, but what guarantee can she give us that the civil procedure rule committee will be able to consider the proposed small claims increase, which covers workplace injuries, independent of Government? Why can we not debate the measure on the Floor of the House?

Lucy Frazer: As we see from the questions raised today, there is an opportunity for Members to make points they wish to make. Our Department is always listening, and there will be scrutiny through the statutory instrument procedure in due course.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Every time I am foolish enough to turn on the television, there are adverts from lawyers offering free advice on workplace injuries. Surely we cannot be in want of any more such advice.

Lucy Frazer: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. We are here to serve the people, and we are here to serve people who have claims. People can still bring their claims through a very simple process in our courts. I should also mention that the Ministry of Justice has brought forward and is progressing an online system for money claims, which is achieving a great deal of satisfaction among users.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): The Government have rightly exempted vulnerable road users from the proposed changes. However, two colleagues—say, two paramedics or two police officers—who are both injured at work on the roads could be treated quite differently, with one able to get legal advice and pay no cost to get compensation, and one having to fight insurers on their own, simply because one was injured on a motorbike and the other in an ambulance or squad car. Rather than hold working people to different standards, can the Government exempt all people injured in the course of their work?

Lucy Frazer: We are concerned about the injury that is suffered, not the person’s profession. As I said, this measure will help people to access courts. The small claims limit for other money claims is £10,000, not £2,000, and people will still be able to get justice.

**Short Prison Sentences: Homelessness**

2. Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of people who become homeless immediately after being released from short prison sentences. [908246]

11. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the number of people who become homeless immediately after being released from short prison sentences. [908255]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Far too many people on short sentences—almost 35%—struggle to find suitable accommodation. That is why we are now focusing on a pilot in Bristol, Pentonville and Leeds. We not only want to get ex-offenders into accommodation, but are putting £6.4 million into ensuring that they have right kind of support, with up to five hours a week on life skills and financial management skills, and access the right services.

Matt Western: I thank the Minister for his response. A study done by the charity Revolving Doors estimates that there was a 25-fold increase between October 2016 and June 2018 in the number of prisoners sleeping rough who have served less than six months. Does that information embarrass the Government and the Minister?
Rory Stewart: First, I pay tribute to Revolving Doors, which is a very impressive charity. I am afraid those are not the figures we have in the MOJ, but I am very happy to sit down with Revolving Doors and understand how it is arriving as such figures. Broadly speaking, sadly, the level of homelessness among people on short sentences has remained, in our terms, relatively static over the past decade, but I respect Revolving Doors, and I am very happy to look at that evidence with it.

Kerry McCarthy: When prisoners fall on that fine line between being criminals and actually being victims of crime themselves—I am particularly thinking of young people who are caught up in gangs and county lines-type drug dealing—what support is being given to them to make sure that if they are rehoused, they are rehoused away from the scene from their offending, so they are in a safe place and do not get dragged back into gang activity?

Rory Stewart: This is a very good challenge. We can use licence conditions to try to ensure that somebody does not return to the scene of their offending. The problem, as the hon. Lady will be aware, is that we of course have to balance that against the importance of family relationships for rehabilitation. We want to try to locate someone in a place where they will not be tempting into further reoffending, but we do not want to locate them in a place where they lose all contact with family and community.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that it is wrong for local authorities to discriminate against ex-offenders by putting them at the bottom of the queue, sometimes saying they have no local connections—through no fault of their own, if they have been in prison—and that ex-offenders should be treated fairly and equally, along with everyone else?

Rory Stewart: I agree 100%. That has now become easier to enforce through recent legislation, but we continue to work very closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. There are local councils that are doing fantastic work in housing ex-offenders, but it is true that ex-offenders can fall through the gaps. In particular, the pilot in Bristol, Pentonville and Leeds is an opportunity to demonstrate how we can work better with local authorities.

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): I am proud to have become a trustee of Nacro recently. Will the Minister continue to work with me and Nacro to reduce the number of prisoners who are released at the end of the week, which thereby reduces the number of services available to them?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work she has done with Nacro. Indeed, we had an excellent hour-long session with Nacro on the issue of Friday releases. We are looking at this, but it is worth bearing it in mind that we cannot simply solve this by releasing people on Thursday. That would mean dealing with everybody who will otherwise come out on Friday, Saturday and Sunday as well, so we would have four times the workload on a Thursday. We are, however, looking for solutions to this problem.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Further to the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), does the Minister recognise that housing allocation policies often mean it is difficult to remove an offender from an area where they have criminal connections, because they do not have local connections in the area to which it would be sensible to move them? What discussions is his Department having with the MHCLG about housing allocation policies supporting the relocation of those offenders?

Rory Stewart: The answer is that we have two formal mechanisms: we have a taskforce focused on housing and we have a taskforce focused particularly on rough sleeping. In both those scenarios, we are pushing very hard with the MHCLG to resolve many issues, of which that is an important one.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Care after Combat’s mentoring scheme for 360 veterans has achieved a fivefold reduction in reoffending. Quite rightly, we are spending a small amount to save £20 million in the system. What are the Government doing further to support these sorts of mentoring initiatives to tackle both homelessness and reoffending?

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to Care after Combat, which I have had the opportunity to meet, along with the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), who has responsibility for veterans. There is a great deal of support, particularly that provided by military charities, and I would like to pay tribute to SSALA—the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association—the Royal British Legion and, of course, Help for Heroes, which has done incredible work on the issue of offenders who are also veterans. It is important to understand, however, that the issues faced by veterans are often a subset of the issues faced by many of our offenders, particularly in relation to mental health, addiction, housing and employment. We need to think about them, whether they are veterans or civilians, in a single act.

EU Withdrawal Agreement: Co-operation on Justice

3. David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): What assessment has made of the potential effect of the proposed EU withdrawal agreement on UK-EU co-operation on justice matters.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The withdrawal agreement will ensure a smooth and orderly departure from the EU on 29 March. It includes an implementation period until the end of 2020, during which existing civil and commercial judicial co-operation will continue. We have also agreed that the cases started before the end of the implementation period will be concluded under existing EU rules, and subsequent judgments in those cases will be enforced.

David Linden: Police Scotland currently benefits from a strong relationship with other EU partners, such as Europol and Eurojust, which is vital for dealing with the cross-border crime that takes place. What assurances can the Minister give me that Police Scotland will continue to have such direct links after Brexit?
Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about Eurojust and Europol, which are under the direct remit of the Home Office, but we of course work closely with them. I was pleased to see references in the political declaration to mechanisms to ensure that the services and intelligence operations under them will continue.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): The Minister will know that the Justice Committee has published two reports that set out some of the key areas that will be put at risk for British legal services, British companies and British citizens if we do not have legal continuity, should we face the regrettable event of a no deal. Is that why, perhaps, the Secretary of State was entirely right to write as he did in the Financial Times the other day?

Lucy Frazer: I know that my hon. Friend, as Chair of the Justice Committee, has done a significant amount of work on this issue, and I have been pleased to respond to a number of debates that raised these important issues. The deal will allow us to continue working closely with the EU, specifically on family matters, which are important to so many citizens. We will continue to press for broader civil jurisdiction arrangements.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Can the Minister confirm that the Brexit talks on co-operation on justice and security have not yet been concluded, and that the limited text on justice and security in the political declaration is not legally binding? Can she give the House her best estimate of how long, were the House to vote for the withdrawal agreement, it would take to conclude the specific Brexit talks on justice and security? One year? Two years?

Lucy Frazer: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, the political declaration sets out the framework for the negotiations that will go forward. I would encourage him to read the assessment the Government produced on 28 November on the security partnership, which compares the impact of the criminal justice and law enforcement proposals set out in the political declaration with a no deal scenario.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): At any one time, there are about 5,000 EU nationals in our prisons, yet in the last six years, under the ineffective EU compulsory prisoner transfer agreement, only 217 have been sent back to prison in their own country. Will the Minister ensure that we can deport more EU nationals from our prisons once we leave the European Union?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an important point about prisoner transfer. Since 2010, we have removed more than 44,000 foreign national offenders from our prisons, our immigration removal centres and our prisons, our immigration removal centres and the community. Of course, the EU prisoner transfer provisions facilitate those arrangements, but we have other measures in place with over 100 other countries to ensure that we can continue prisoner transfers.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The political declaration makes no reference to the Schengen information system database or the European criminal records information system. Both Police Scotland and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service in Scotland are concerned about that, because both tools are fundamental to fighting and investigating crime. Can the Minister confirm that Scotland will lose access to these measures after Brexit?

Lucy Frazer: As I mentioned, the Prime Minister has made it clear that she is seeking to ensure that the measures that underlay them, and the co-operation within them, will continue as far as possible post-Brexit.

I should mention, because the hon. and learned Lady often asks about liaison with the Scottish Government, that I spoke to my counterpart, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice on 29 November, and he reiterated to me how pleased he was with our engagement at official level on the negotiations with the EU.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The Government have created a Brexit crisis through their rotten deal, which is abhorred by both sides of the House. While the Prime Minister runs scared of democracy and delays the meaningful vote, Cabinet responsibility has broken down, with Ministers pitching their own plan B or even plotting leadership bids. Planning for future judicial collaboration with Europe is suffering as a result. The Justice Committee says the Government are providing “little detail or certainty” about future judicial co-operation. The Lords EU Justice Sub-Committee warns of a “worrying level of complacency”. When will the Secretary of State pay as much attention to dealing with this problem as he does to problems in his own party?

Lucy Frazer: My Department is making a lot of efforts to ensure we have the right deal. We have received £17 million for EU Brexit preparations. We have over 110 full-time employees, including newly recruited employees, working across deal and no deal. I would say, as the Lord Chancellor said in his FT article at the weekend, that the Conservative party is ensuring the future of our country, whereas the leader of the Labour party is just trying to make political points to ensure a general election.

Ease of Initiating Legal Proceedings

5. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to make it easier for people to initiate legal proceedings.

[N908249] The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): The Government are simplifying many application processes, making it much easier to initiate proceedings. Once a decision to get divorced has been made, one can now petition for a divorce online. Probate can be applied for online and a money claim can be issued, for up to £10,000, using our online courts process.

Nigel Mills: Will the Minister go a little further and say how she can make it easier for people to participate in proceedings once they have initiated them?

Lucy Frazer: My hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. It is important not only to be able to initiate proceedings easily, but participate in them. Recently, we had early testing of full video hearings held in a tax tribunal, enabling the applicant and the respondent to not have to travel to court or take any time off work. In
fact, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs was based in Belfast in those cases and the applicants were elsewhere in the country—and, in one case, in Greece. That small scale evaluation shows that participants found them convenient and easy to understand. They will not be appropriate for every case, but this is technology we need to consider.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): The number of litigants in person has shot up. What urgent action is the Ministry of Justice taking to ensure proper representation for people across the board?

Lucy Frazer: Litigants in person do need support through our justice system, which is why, over the past few years, we have spent £6.5 million investing in helping them through the court process. Many of our reforms which form part of our £1 billion programme will make sure that forms are easier, applying to court is easier, getting to court and the whole process is easier for people whether they have a lawyer or not.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister outline any intentions to review the legal aid process, which currently does not allow middle class families to access legal redress due to a lack of ability to pay bills and thereby pay for legal help and assistance?

Lucy Frazer: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are in the process of an extensive legal aid review, which will look at many aspects and report early in the new year. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: I hear the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) burbling from a sedentary position about the spirit of Christmas. I call Mr Barry Sheerman.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, are we really going back to the old days when people used to say that the courts of England were open to everyone, just like the Ritz hotel? The truth is that access to justice in this country is being diminished. The Department’s budget has been cut badly. Indeed, in the area I am very interested in, miscarriages of justice, there is not the money to keep the commission going properly.

Mr Speaker: In my experience the hon. Gentleman is interested in every area of every policy in our public life.

Lucy Frazer: I have now heard that phrase three times in debates I have taken part in. The reason various cuts were made in 2010 was the perilous financial situation that our Parliament found itself in. We in the Department are looking extremely carefully at how we deliver justice for people. We are investing £1 billion in our core reform programme, while ensuring we use taxpayers’ money efficiently and well.

Mr Speaker: Plenty of time left. I call Christian Matheson.

Christian Matheson: Morale among prison officers is at an all-time low because of low pay, understaffing and soaring violence, and now a retirement age that could go as late as 68. Police officers get the same protection as prison officers, and they are allowed to retire at 60. Why can prison officers not?

Mr Gauke: Of course, a deal was offered to prison officers and rejected a couple of years or so ago, but to come back to the point about morale, it is important that we address violence in prisons. That is why we have increased the number of staff, why we are giving prison officers the tools that they need—for example, PAVA—and why we are determined to ensure that we can turn this increase in violence around.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): It is clear that we have an issue with experienced prison officers leaving the service. Can my right hon. Friend reassure the House that, in line with best human resources practices, exit interviews are being conducted with staff before they leave so that we can address the issues that are causing them to leave the service?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend is right to say that that is best practice, and it does happen within the prison service. We are looking at the evidence of the effectiveness of that to ensure that we make best use of it. It is important that we learn from the experiences of prison officers and get their feedback, so that when prison officers do leave, we understand the reasons why.

Ellie Reeves (Lewisham West and Penge) (Lab): The independent monitoring board at HMP Birmingham has said that standards have improved as a direct result of the reduction in the prison population and the addition of much needed staff. Already this year, urgent notifications have been issued at Nottingham, Birmingham, Bedford and Exeter prisons. How bad do things have to get before the Government launch a specific plan to re-recruit experienced prison officers who have left the prison system due to the Government’s austerity?

Mr Gauke: I am glad that the hon. Lady acknowledges that progress is being made at Birmingham, and it was right that we stepped in in August last year to turn that prison around. I reiterate that we have increased prison officer numbers very significantly, by 4,364, when our target was to recruit an additional 2,500 prison officers. We achieved that well ahead of schedule, and we have got the numbers increasing. We are seeing some signs of improvements in our prisons—not just at HMP Birmingham—but we need to build on that. It is still the early stages, but we are making progress.
Mr Gauke: I am delighted to do that and to pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she put in on that Bill. It is an important step forward. She is right to highlight the problems with mobile phones. As a Government, we are determined to take action to address that, and her work helps us.

**Offenders: Access to Education and Employment**

7. **Stephen Metcalfe** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve offenders’ access to education and employment. [908251]

8. **Mark Pawsey** (Rugby) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve offenders’ access to education and employment. [908252]

**The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke):** In May, we published the education and employment strategy to create a system where each prisoner is set on a path to employment, with prison education work geared from the outset towards employment on release. We have launched the New Futures Network and appointed a CEO to drive its roll-out. The NFN identifies where skill gaps exist and works with employers to fill them. We are also empowering governors to commission education provision that leads to work. Activity to appoint the new education suppliers who will deliver the curricula that governors have designed is almost complete.

Stephen Metcalfe: My right hon. Friend mentioned the New Futures Network. Will he expand a bit more on how that is achieving employment for offenders upon release?

Mr Gauke: The New Futures Network brokers partnerships between prisons and employers in England and Wales, which help businesses to fill skills gaps and prisoners to find employment on release. The NFN has a central team based in London that works with large national employers. We are also placing employment brokers across England and Wales to work with small and medium-sized enterprises and regional businesses. I am pleased to say that since the publication of the strategy in May, more than 100 new organisations have registered an interest in working with offenders.

Mark Pawsey: I have been working with a constituent who has recently completed a nine-and-a-half-year prison sentence. He has reminded me that in that time, a great deal has moved online—the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. and learned Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), referred to initiating legal proceedings online. My constituent says that that places him at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing services and applying for jobs, so what steps are the Department taking to ensure that offenders gain digital skills and retain them?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Digital skills are already taught in many prisons. We are empowering governors to have more control over the curriculum, but we are also determined to ensure that there is some consistency, so from next April our core common curriculum will include ICT, which must be taught in every prison.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): It is a good idea to empower governors to make the right choices for their establishments, either as individuals or in clusters, but does the Department intend to give them a sufficient budget to enable them to do that in a way that will actually make a difference?

Mr Gauke: We want to ensure that the path to employment is set out for every prisoner, that all prisoners have that opportunity to receive the education that they need, and that there is a focus on work. That is a priority for our Department, and I am confident that we can deliver on it.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Reoffending rates remain stubbornly high, but in Magilligan prison in my constituency, prisoners reaching the end of their sentence are allowed out under close supervision to work in the community. Does the Secretary of State agree that such action leads to a reduction in reoffending and should be replicated throughout the United Kingdom?

Mr Gauke: That is an excellent point. Workplace release on temporary licence has a key role to play in giving prisoners employment opportunities and easing the transition from prison life to post-prison existence. I am keen to ensure that we do what we can with workplace ROTL, and I should like it to be used more.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What further action can be taken to encourage more employers to offer such opportunities during the final period of a sentence? That is being done very effectively at Thorn Cross prison in Appleton Thorn, near Warrington.

Mr Gauke: Encouraging employers is very much what the New Futures Network is about. I sense a change of attitude among employers: more and more of them want to do this, because they recognise that there are benefits for them as well as for society as a whole. As I have said, more than 100 employers have signed up to the network, and I encourage those who are following our proceedings closely to do as much as possible on this front.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the disproportionate levels of often undiagnosed special educational needs and disability—especially difficulties with speech and language, dyslexia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder—in the prison population. What measures has he introduced to ensure that all those prisoners are assessed and then appropriately supported in their education?
Mr Gauke: We are keen to develop specialist education plans when people come into prisons, because that is when we need to identify issues such as those that the hon. Lady has mentioned. However, the really important point that she has raised is the need for us to work across Government. It is not just about what happens in the Prison Service or the Ministry of Justice; we need to co-ordinate with, for instance, the national health service, the Department for Work and Pensions and local authorities. If we are to turn people’s lives around, we need a cross-Government approach. I am pleased that the Reducing Reoffending Board has been established, and that there is a real willingness across Government to make progress.

**Prisons: Drones**

9. **Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): What recent steps the Government has taken to tackle the use of drones over prisons. [908253]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Preventing drones from going into prisons is, of course, a huge priority. First, that means working to identify and catch the criminal gangs who are flying them in; secondly, it means electronic measures to interrupt the drones and make it possible to interrogate those people; and, thirdly and most fundamentally, it means protective security. For example, Mr Speaker, if there is a good grille on the window, you cannot stick your hand out of the window and take the drugs from the drone.

Mr Speaker: That is a useful piece of practical advice from the Minister. I am deeply indebted to him.

Vicky Ford: Drug use in prisons frequently fuels serious violence, but those who fly the drones or throw the drugs over the walls often receive little more than a ticking off. What more can be done to dissuade people—especially young people—from such behaviour?

Rory Stewart: I know that my hon. Friend does wonderful work with the prison in her constituency. As she says, we need to take action, and we are taking action. There have been 40 convictions of people using drones, and we have imposed 140 years’-worth of prison sentences. No one should be in any doubt that importing drugs into prisons with a drone is a very serious crime, and I am pleased to say that, thanks to the Department’s work since 2015, we are getting on top of the problem.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Minister mentioned in July and re-emphasised today the importance of jamming equipment in prisons; how many prisons have that equipment?

Rory Stewart: First, that is classified information, but, secondly, the answer is not that many prisons. It is very expensive equipment to use, but we are looking at an electronic fencing technique which has been deployed in Guernsey. We can learn a lot from Guernsey prison: if that electronic fence in Guernsey works, it is a good cheap solution. We would need to check its technical specifications and then we could look at rolling it out.

**Prisons: Prevention of Violence**

10. **Colin Clark** (Gordon) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to prevent violence in prisons. [908254]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Violence in prisons is fundamentally driven by three things: drugs, the conditions in the prison, and relationships between prison officers and prisoners. We are addressing all three. To cut down on drugs, we are putting much more perimeter security in place to make it more difficult to get drugs in. Secondly, we are investing a great deal in decency and cleanliness in prisons. But the most important thing is the training and support for our hard-working prison officers so they can develop the right relationships with prisoners—ones that are strict but also humane—in order to bring proper behaviour management into place.

Colin Clark: Clearly reducing violence in prisons does depend on effective training of prison officers, but what assessment has my hon. Friend made of improvements in the way violent offenders are handled?

Rory Stewart: We repeatedly survey this; we have a specialist team looking at it. We have a long study under the violence reduction strategy, and the real conclusion is that it is about training. It is about what happens at the cell door—about how we develop respectful relationships in the same way that a good teacher would. There are high expectations on prison officers and on prisoners, so that we can have a safe, humane relationship that also has boundaries in place to control behaviour.

23. [908267] **Thangam Debbonaire** (Bristol West) (Lab): The Minister has made much of the 10 pilot areas, and I am glad that Bristol is one of them. However, what comfort does he have for the prison officers and prisoners of the other 110?

Rory Stewart: This challenge is absolutely right; we are focusing initially on 10 prisons, as it is difficult to achieve cultural change in 120 prisons simultaneously. The idea is to develop in those 10 prisons the right standard model on drugs, violence and decency, and if we are successful, as I believe we will be by August, to then roll that out across the rest of the estate.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The Minister yet again comes to the House all gung-ho, even though he has absolutely no reason to be since safety in our prisons continues to be compromised and they remain in a state of emergency. One such example is HMP Birmingham, one of the most dangerous prisons in the country with conditions there found to be so bad by the prisons inspector that control was taken away from G4S. At the very minimum will the Minister give me assurances, or a guarantee, that this prison will not be returned to the private sector?

Rory Stewart: As I have said on a number of occasions, this is not fundamentally about private and public: there are good private prisons and good public prisons, and there are bad private prisons and bad public prisons. But I will give this assurance: unless G4S can demonstrate
that it can take back that prison and run it both well and sustainably, we will not be returning the prison to G4S.

**Legal Advice Deserts**

12. Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the prevalence of legal advice deserts. [908256]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who chairs the all-party group on legal aid and has done a lot of work in this area. We recognise that in some sparsely populated areas it is more difficult to find service providers, but the Legal Aid Agency regularly reviews market capacity to make sure there is adequate provision across the country and moves quickly to fill any gaps that it identifies. At the latest civil legal aid tender, the number of offices providing access to advice increased by 39% for immigration and asylum, by 188% for welfare benefits and by 7% for debt and housing.

Ms Buck: With homelessness up by 70%, with universal credit wreaking absolute havoc on housing costs and with 1 million properties unfit for occupation, why do the new figures reveal that there are 1 million people with no access to a legal aid-provided housing lawyer at all and 15 million people in areas where there is only one provider, raising huge issues of capacity and potentially conflicts of interest? Will the review of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, when we finally get to see it, address that issue so that people everywhere in the country can have access to the legal aid services they need?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Lady makes an important point about ensuring that we have support for those who are most vulnerable, but I would like to make two points on welfare benefits, which she has highlighted. First, the most important outcome for benefit claimants is that the decisions on their claims should be right first time. This avoids the need to go to court at all, and my Department is working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure efficient decision making. I have met the Minister twice to ensure that we get those decisions right first time. Secondly, while decisions on welfare claims significantly impact the lives of often vulnerable people, the claims are often not complicated. We are making changes to the tribunal system to ensure that those cases are handled simply, effectively and more quickly.

20. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): My constituency has been rated by the Law Society as a legal aid desert. In all of Somerset, there is only one firm that is authorised to provide legal aid on housing. What specific advice can the Minister give to my constituents on that?

Lucy Frazer: As I have recognised, there are areas of the country that suffer. The Legal Aid Agency looks at those areas, and re-procurement tender exercises are going out in seven of them.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure whether the hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) is seeking to take part in Question 12 or anticipating Question 13.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I am anticipating Question 13.

Mr Speaker: It is the latter. We will get there when we are ready, and we are grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s enthusiasm.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Law Commission of England and Wales says that working people on low incomes are being systematically denied the right to a fair trial because of restrictive legal aid rules. When will the Government act in this shocking and shameful situation?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman will have heard that we are doing a review of legal aid, which will be published early in the new year. I was interested to read the recent Scottish Government report on legal aid, which implements a number of the things that we are already doing, including using technology to help our court processes.

Richard Burgen (Leeds East) (Lab): The current Prime Minister unleashed the Home Office’s hostile environment against migrants, and the Windrush scandal shows just
how easily people can fall foul of this Government’s complex and cruel immigration rules. It is even tougher for those who have to navigate this hostile environment without legal advice, yet access to legal aid-funded immigration advice has fallen by 68% under the Tories, from 120,000 cases in 2010 to 39,000 cases this year. So do the Government regret scrapping such publicly funded legal advice that can save people from unfair decisions and deportations, and if so, will they reinstate it?

Lucy Frazer: The hon. Gentleman has not made that offer. The Opposition have made an offer in relation to welfare, but not, I note, in relation to immigration. Let me remind him that people can already get legal advice for asylum and non-asylum cases, and for cases involving detention, the Special Immigration Appeals Commission, domestic violence and trafficking. I want to make it clear to the House and to everyone who is listening that people are often not claiming legal aid because they do not believe they are entitled to it, because the Opposition and some others suggest that it is not available.

**Prisons: Mobile Phones**

13. Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to prevent the use of mobile phones in prisons.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): Fundamentally, a mobile phone needs to be moved by a person, it is a metal object and it transmits, which means that the three ways of dealing with a mobile telephone are to get intelligence on the organised criminal gangs that are moving them around, to use metal detectors to discover the devices, and to use electronic measures to identify where the devices are located within prisons, to jam the signals and to interrogate the calls.

Dr Offord: It has been reported that Anthony Russell, a contestant on “The X Factor”, used a mobile phone to communicate with a convicted prisoner by FaceTime from the ITV studios, of all places. Will the Minister consider making it a specific criminal offence for anyone knowingly to communicate with someone in the criminal justice system?

Rory Stewart: I am happy to sit down with my hon. Friend. It is absolutely a criminal offence to have a mobile telephone in prison, but the complexities of what my hon. Friend suggests go a long way beyond that. It is certainly not an offence to communicate with a prisoner. In fact, we encourage prisoners to continue family relations, which is important to prevent reoffending and protect the public.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): While we of course do not want prisoners using mobile phones, we are happy for prisoners to watch television. The Minister knows that I am unhappy about his decision to buy televisions from China instead of from Cello in my constituency. Will he look again at the criteria for such public contracts?

Mr Speaker: This is a kind of debate between mobile televisions from another part of the world or mobile televisions from Bishop Auckland.

**Rogue Bailiffs**

14. Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the number of rogue bailiffs.

Lucy Frazer: It is important to gather the evidence, which is what this consultation will do. As the hon. Lady will know, because she asked a question at the previous Justice questions when the Citizens Advice report had just come out, we want to examine the evidence fully, and we are asking for evidence not just from individuals, but from the enforcement agencies themselves. My officials have asked Citizens Advice for a meeting to discuss the content of the report, which identifies a large amount of inappropriate behaviour.
The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): We do not tolerate violence against our dedicated and hard-working prison officers. We are strengthening frontline officer numbers and rolling out the tools they need, such as body-worn cameras and to tackle the causes of violence. We are giving officers the tools they need, such as body-worn cameras and PAVA spray, to respond where incidents do occur.

Andrew Rosindell: The Secretary of State will know that, in the past year, there has been a 20% increase in violent crime against prison officers. Does he agree there is a disparity between prosecutions when members of the public are assaulted and prosecutions when people in the public service are assaulted? Also, is it not correct that an assault against a prison officer is just as bad as an assault against a policeman?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have to take assaults against prison officers very seriously. They are putting their lives on the frontline, and we are working closely with the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to make sure that crimes committed in prison are dealt with effectively. There are good examples of work with the police and the CPS, such as at HMP Isis. The Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 came into force in November, and it increases the maximum custodial sentence from six months to 12 months for those who assault emergency workers, including prison officers.

Nigel Huddleston: Recent incidents at Long Lartin Prison in my constituency show that more work is still needed on prison officer safety. Can the Secretary of State assure my constituents who work at Long Lartin that the Government do not consider it job done on prison safety and that they will continue to explore further ways to improve prison safety?

Mr Gauke: Indeed, we will continue to find ways of making improvements. I visited Long Lartin in the summer and met a number of my hon. Friend’s constituents who work as prison officers to discuss this issue. The high assault figures are something that we have to address, which is why we have taken the measures I have already outlined. We will continue to focus on bringing down those numbers.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that the high number of prisoners with mental health conditions is also a serious problem for prison officers? Will he look into the two separate incidents at Nottingham Prison where, even though my constituents had been independently assessed by psychiatrists as needing to be transferred to secure mental health beds, it took five months for them to be transferred?

Mr Gauke: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising those cases and I will certainly look at the incidents she mentions. She is right to highlight the importance of addressing mental health issues within prisons. A very large proportion of prisoners have mental health issues and, in answer to an earlier question, I addressed the need to work closely with the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that we address such points.

Chris Williamson: Does the Secretary of State agree that the high number of prisoners with mental health issues is also a serious problem for prison officers?

Mr Gauke: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman is best placed to lecture on common sense versus ideology. The reoffending rate has fallen in the time since “Transforming Rehabilitation” and we would like it to fall further. There are issues with how the system is working, which is why we took the entirely pragmatic approach of bringing the contracts to an end and making some important and necessary changes to ensure that we can do more to reduce reoffending.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): Will the Minister update the House on progress towards the abolition of the same roof rule?

Mr Gauke: I pay tribute to the work of the hon. Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) in her campaign on this issue. As the Secretary of State has said, we anticipate, subject to the parliamentary timetable, to be able to lay an order as swiftly as possible.
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Can the Lord Chancellor assist me in finding out the answer to a question that the Attorney General and the Brexit Secretary have been unable to answer: how much taxpayers’ money did the UK Government spend fighting the litigation that established that the article 50 notice can be unilaterally revoked?

Mr Gauke: I certainly cannot give that answer this morning, but of course there is no intention to revoke article 50.

TS. [908273] Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): In Chelmsford, the police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the youth offender programme have occasionally recommended that a young offender be placed on a curfew in order to safeguard that young person from being further targeted by criminal gangs, but sometimes the magistrates are not fully aware of the circumstances and overturn the curfew. May I encourage Ministers to encourage the magistrates to work more closely on sharing information between services, so that the full information can be taken into account?

Edward Argar: It is of course for magistrates to make decisions and they do have the right to overturn recommendations. However, as my hon. Friend says, when making those decisions, they should be in possession of the full facts from the youth offending teams, the police and the CPS. She is right to highlight the importance of information sharing and sharing that information in good time. The Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), and I continue to work on that.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The Government’s ideological experiment of privatising probation has been a calamitous failure. It was such a flawed idea that even this Government have had to cancel the current private contracts, which were costing the public more and more money while leaving them less and less safe. Yet the Government are set to re-tender those contracts back to the private sector. Interserve is currently the largest probation provider, supervising 40,000 offenders, yet it is now in rescue talks, trying not to become the next Carillion. So will the Justice Secretary commit today to ensuring that Interserve is not awarded any of the new private probation contracts?

Mr Gauke: We will award the contracts to those best placed to carry them out. I have to say that the hon. Gentleman’s hostility to the private sector, in all its forms, in all contexts, is not a sensible or pragmatic approach to trying to ensure that we get best value for money for the taxpayer while making improvements to reducing reoffending.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Senior managers at Lloyds-HBOS were found guilty of a scandalous fraud against their own business customers but, thus far, the bank itself has avoided or evaded any corporate sanction. Would my right hon. Friend support the Solicitor General’s efforts to make failure to prevent an economic crime a corporate offence?

Mr Gauke: My hon. Friend, who campaigns tirelessly on these issues, will be aware that we ran a call for evidence on corporate criminal liability to determine whether the current law is adequate. This is a complex part of the law and consultation responses offered a broad range of views. We are currently analysing those with Departments across Government and we will publish our response in 2019.

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): First, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the work he does in supporting the work of Nottingham Prison, which is one of the 10 priority prisons. We are therefore bringing scanners into those prisons. We are currently shipping those scanners over, but a range of different types of scanning will be taking place: X-ray scanners used on an intelligence-led basis, which can penetrate through the skin; metal detectors on a more regular basis as people go through; and additional dogs.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Minister responsible for rehabilitation will be aware of the great work that groups such as St Mary Magdalene church in Torquay do with ex-offenders. That work could be enhanced if such groups could use the old Torquay magistrates court, which is still empty. Will he agree to meet me and representatives of the church to discuss how, if they acquired the building, they could make a real difference?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am happy to meet my hon. Friend. I encourage Ministers to meet as well, I am sure they will do so.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for asking almost exactly the question that I was about to ask, because that gives me the opportunity to expand on the answer he was given. Will the Minister tell us a little more about whether the Government are minded to make Spice and Mamba—drugs that are causing huge problems in Nottingham Prison and many others—class A drugs? What other strategies do we have to reduce the amount of drugs in prisons?

Rory Stewart: The big legislative change that we are trying to introduce, and for which we would very much like to get cross-party support, is a provision to allow us to do proper testing on Spice—an endeavour that is in a private Member’s Bill that is currently trying to make its way through the House. As the hon. Gentleman has pointed out, Spice is a real problem. It is providing unbelievably aggressive behaviour and it is extremely bad for people’s health. We can search along the perimeter but yes, we also need to do more in the law.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Citing reputational reasons, one of my local authority employers failed to keep on a member of staff after a probation period because of a spent conviction that was known...
about. Would public sector employers not get a better reputation if they helped to turn people’s lives around when they want to put something back into society?

Rory Stewart: I could not agree more. One of the best ways to prevent reoffending and therefore protect the public is to help people into employment. Ex-prisoners can be some of the most loyal and hard-working employees one can find. We encourage all employers to take a realistic, pragmatic approach. Many convictions are absolutely irrelevant to the work that the person is doing or to public protection. The best way to protect the public is to provide a job.

T6. [908274] Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): My constituents Gemma and Paul Black were devastated last year when their 22-month-old daughter, Pearl Melody Black, was killed by a runaway car. I understand that the police and Crown Prosecution Service have been unable to bring charges because of a loophole in the law. Will the Secretary of State or a Minister meet me, possibly with Department for Transport colleagues, to discuss how we can avoid having other parents facing this suffering?

Rory Stewart: First, let me share our very sincere condolences. It is the most horrifying thing to lose a 22-month-old in that way. Secondly, we are currently consulting on changing the law to have a life sentence for causing death by dangerous driving or by careless driving under the influence. We can do an enormous amount more, both legally and in terms of road safety and driving tests. We must bring down the number of people who are killed. The hon. Gentleman raises a particularly tragic incident, and I would be delighted to meet him to discuss it.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): Last week, the House passed the Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Bill, which is an important part of court modernisation. Does the Lord Chancellor accept that there remains a pressing need to introduce some pressures on parliamentary time. Of course, there are currently some pressures on parliamentary time.

Mr Gauke: I share the desire of my hon. Friend the Chair of the Justice Committee to do that when parliamentary time allows. Of course, there are currently some pressures on parliamentary time.

T7. [908275] Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): Too many prisoners are in desperate need of drug rehabilitation services. How many inmates are currently using drug rehabilitation services and what is the MOJ’s target for 2019?

Rory Stewart: We do an assessment whenever a prisoner comes in. In a prison such as Humber, for example, almost a quarter of the prisoners are currently on some form of drug rehabilitation treatment. Those are very high numbers. Drugs in prison are a big issue: nearly 50% of prisoners have alcohol or drug-related addiction issues. The NHS takes the lead on that; I would be happy to get back to the hon. Lady with the figures.

Edward Argar: I welcome any initiative that aims to combat knife crime by educating young people about the potentially devastating impact it can have, not only on victims and their families but on the perpetrators themselves. I pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend has highlighted and would be happy to learn more about it. We must all do more to tackle serious violence, which is exactly what the Government are doing.

Mr Speaker: In the name of fairness to colleagues, those asking a question should confine themselves to a single short sentence.

T8. [908276] Vera Hodge (Bath) (LD): What discussions has the Minister had with the Home Secretary on the use of Clare’s law in cases where a restraining order has been granted through a civil process, which puts the onus on the victim?

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that question. She rightly highlights a very important issue. I work closely with my opposite number in the Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), on tackling domestic abuse. We will be publishing a draft domestic abuse Bill and consultation response shortly. In respect of the hon. Lady’s specific point, I am very happy to meet her and discuss it further.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): With which specific countries are the Government negotiating new compulsory prisoner transfer agreements?

Lucy Frazer: The Government already have agreements with around 100 countries in relation to prisoner transfers.

T9. [908277] Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Scottish Government have raised concerns about the effectiveness of the European arrest warrant as European member states will be permitted to operate constitutional bans on extraditing their citizens during transition. Can the Minister clarify this situation?

Lucy Frazer: I think the hon. Lady will have been pleased to see a paragraph in relation to extradition in the future framework.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Ministers will be aware of the very low attainment in reading among prisoners. Is anything being done to try to improve the situation? I understand that the average reading age in a prison is 11.

Rory Stewart: It is a very serious problem. As my right hon. and learned Friend has pointed out, almost half the prisoners have a reading age of under 11. Perhaps 25% of prisoners have a reading age of six. There is an enormous amount that we can do and that is where the education and employment strategy comes in, which is about making sure that the education is relevant and leads to a job.

T10. [908278] Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): The Tories have cut £1 billion off the legal aid budget to the poor. This has meant a cut of 99.5% in the number of
people receiving legal aid for benefit cases. Will the Tories sleep well at Christmas knowing that they are starving the poor?

Lucy Frazer: Various changes were made as a result of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. As the hon. Gentleman will know, we are undertaking a significant review. My Department has met with more than 100 organisations or individuals to discuss the changes that were brought in and my Department will be reporting in the new year.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State commit to implementing the recommendations of the independent Mental Health Act review to reform mental health tribunals and will the Government commit adequate resourcing to the recommendations?

Edward Argar: As the hon. Lady will be aware, the Government have welcomed the independent review of the Mental Health Act and have rightly committed to reform mental health legislation. Some of the review’s recommendations, as she alludes to, have particular implications for civil justice and particular reforms to the Mental Health Tribunal. My Department is working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care to consider the review, its recommendations and implications in detail and we will respond shortly.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): Today, it has been confirmed that three quarters of all Welsh female prisoners are serving a custodial sentence of less than six months. There is no women’s centre in Wales, so may I ask the Minister to introduce new funding for a women’s centre in Wales, so that we are able to have different ways of putting women forward, other than custodial sentences, because it is not working?

Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Something that runs through our female offender strategy is moving away from short sentences to alternative provisions. He highlights a particular issue in the context of Wales. It is something on which I have had discussions with the previous Cabinet Secretary, Alun Davies, and I look forward to meeting his successor in that role to have further discussions.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Many of those convicted of murder under joint enterprise thought that they would be able to seek appeals of their convictions after the Supreme Court ruling that the law had taken a wrong turn. However, the recent loss of the Laura Mitchell case, the first brought by the Criminal Cases Review Commission, has shown that the appeal bar is impossibly high. What will the Government do about that?

Lucy Frazer: I know that the hon. Lady has campaigned very hard on this. I was very pleased to answer her debate shortly after my appointment. As she knows, the appeal bar is set in relation to all cases, not just in relation to this case, but I am very happy to discuss this issue in a meeting with her.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It was two years ago that the then Secretary of State for Justice agreed to outlaw the cross-examination of survivors of domestic abuse by the perpetrators of their crime, yet the misery goes on. When will the Government outlaw that?

Mr Gauke: We intend to bring forward legislation on this very shortly.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): Ofsted’s recent annual report yet again raised its concerns about high levels of violence in children’s secure training centres. The use of pain-inducing restraint techniques in youth prisons and right across the secure estate has been found to carry up to a 60% chance of causing serious injury to children. This is Government-sanctioned abuse of children. When is it going to end?

Edward Argar: As the hon. Lady will be aware, we have commissioned an independent review, which is being led by Charlie Taylor. I look forward to receiving his report in due course.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): When we debated legal aid last month, the Minister was expecting to publish the LASPO review before Christmas. It is already eight months late, so will she tell us the date on which it will now be published? Why are we not getting it until next year? What is the reason for the delay?

Lucy Frazer: I am happy to take the hon. Gentleman’s question. I remind him what he said to the Law Society several months ago—that it is important to take time to review this important subject. It is important and, as I have said, we have met over 100 organisations and individuals. We finished our final engagement with organisations at the end of last month and we will publish the review early in the new year.
ONS Decisions: Student Loans

12.41 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Urgent Question:

To ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to make a statement on the ONS decision on the treatment of student fees and maintenance loans in the Government’s accounts, and its implications for the public finances.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss):

After its review of the treatment of student loans and Government finances, the Office for National Statistics has decided that some of the spending on student loans will be included in the deficit when the money is first lent to students. This is a technical accounting decision by the ONS, whose independence we support and whose diligence we commend. It is for the independent Office for Budget Responsibility to decide how to reflect this decision in future forecasts, but the ONS has made it clear that there is a lot to decide before the numbers are finalised.

This decision does not affect students’ ability to receive or repay loans. They can still get access to money to help with fees and the cost of living, and they will only start repayments when they are earning £25,000. Moreover, this decision does not have any implications for public debt, as the data and forecasts already include the impact of student loans, including repayments.

The Government make decisions on taxes and spending at Budgets, and the OBR judges whether the Government have met their targets. At the recent Budget, the OBR forecast for headroom was higher than the estimate of the impact of the student loans accounting change. The recent Budget also showed that the Government are meeting their fiscal rules with room to spare, and that debt is beginning its first sustained fall in a generation. This Government are committed to keeping taxes low and investing in Britain’s future.

Wes Streeting: I thank the Chief Secretary for that reply.

The Treasury Committee welcomes the ONS decision, which is in line with our recommendations, but this is more than a little embarrassing for the Government. The OBR estimates that yesterday’s decision adds £12 billion to the deficit, but even the OBR’s method of calculating the sum does not appear entirely consistent with the ONS decision. Can the Chief Secretary therefore tell us what the right figure is, or has the Government’s creative accounting become so creative that it has left even the Chief Secretary bamboozled?

Can the Chief Secretary at least tell us what the fiscal impact will be? Will there be any impact on departmental budgets or on the devolved nations? What does it mean for the Government’s predisposition for selling the student loan book for a song? Does that policy still make sense? Indeed, did it ever make any sense? Vice-Chancellors are understandably worried that yesterday’s decision will lead to a reduction in funding available to our universities.

Given that the Chief Secretary says this is effectively a matter of accounting, rather than cash flows, does she agree with Paul Johnson at the Institute for Fiscal Studies that “If it was right to aim for zero deficit on old definition then it is right to aim for £17bn deficit on new definition”?

Will she confirm that the Government will now revise their fiscal targets in the spring statement, or does she expect students and universities to pay the price for the Government’s accounting trickery and meaningless fiscal targets? Only a matter of weeks ago at the autumn Budget, the Chancellor boasted, “Fiscal Phil says, ‘Fiscal Rules OK’”—[Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 655.]

He looks a bit silly now, doesn’t he?

Where does this leave the Augar review on post-18 education? Can the Chief Secretary assure the House today that the Augar review will focus on further and higher education policy aims first and foremost, and not on how to design a student loans system that is attractive due to its accounting features?

The ONS decision yesterday makes the case for real reform of our higher education system more compelling. Instead of tinkering around the edges, flirting with cuts in fees that would benefit the richest graduates and cuts in places that would only hurt the poorest students, is it not time for real reform: a system that is publicly funded and genuinely free at the point of use?

Elizabeth Truss: I have been very clear in my response that this is fundamentally an accounting decision. It does not affect our decisions on higher education policies. The bodies that we are talking about—the ONS and the OBR—are independent bodies. It is right that the Government do not make decisions on how to treat these figures in our national statistics—they are made by independent bodies, and we fully respect that. The ONS is going to be working out more details. It would therefore be completely wrong for me, outside a fiscal event, to comment on the precise implications for the public finances.

I can reassure Members across the House that we will do the right thing by students, and we have done the right thing by students. We have a record number of students in our universities. We rightly have a system where students contribute to their degrees, which deliver them higher future earnings and greater prospects in later life.

It is a bit of a cheek hearing all this from Labour Members, whose party promised in the 2017 general election that it would write off all the student loan book and then—surprise, surprise—said after the election that it would not any more. I think it is a bit of a joke that Labour Members are coming to this House and trying to give us lectures about student finance.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): The hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) is right to say that the Treasury Committee covered this in our report to the House published earlier this year, but the Chief Secretary is right to say that the decision does not affect any financial help that students now, or students starting in September or beyond, will get. Does she agree that this is actually a debate about political scrutiny of the deficit, which is an important figure at every fiscal event, and that the change will give a truer picture of what is happening with the deficit?

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend, the Chair of the Treasury Committee, is correct. Ultimately, this is about making sure that our independent bodies are giving us advice about how our public finances should
be presented in order to give the best possible picture. That is completely independent from our decisions about what is best for students. The fact is that this decision does not affect cash flows; it affects the presentation of accounts. We should not conflate that with the very right and proper debates we are having about making sure that our students have a finance system that supports them.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): This is not creative accountancy; this is fantasy accounting from the Government. The shadow Chief Secretary talks about Labour’s policy—[Hon. Members: “You’re the shadow Chief Secretary.”] Well, that is not very far away. The Chief Secretary can try to make up Labour’s policies on the hoof. She might make her own up on the hoof, but she should not make up ours on the hoof.

The ONS announcement ends the fiscal illusion that kept student debt off the Government’s books. This is not technical, and it blows a potential £12 billion hole in the Chancellor’s spending plans. At the last Budget, the Institute for Fiscal Studies warned the Chancellor that he was gambling with the public finances, and it seems that he has lost the bet: a reckless Chancellor bluffing his way through Budgets in a desperate attempt to keep his party together while the country is led to ruin and uncertainty.

This change raises a number of serious questions that the Minister must now answer, and has not answered. First, what impact will the additional £12 billion have on the Treasury’s ability to meet the fiscal targets that the Government set out most recently? Or will it mean that the Government have to abandon their fiscal rules yet again, for the umpteenth time? Secondly, will the Chief Secretary guarantee—she has not yet—that students and universities will not be adversely affected by this change? Thirdly, can the Government guarantee that no cap on student numbers will be introduced?

Finally, does this not pose a major challenge to the entire system of student finance which the Government have not only maintained but exacerbated with a trebling of fees—a system that creates a mountain of debt, placed first on the backs of students and now on the Government’s books when students are unable to pay? Would it not be better to adopt Labour’s policy of free university education, as set out in our manifesto—a very popular manifesto—and grey book, which invests in the future of our country by investing in the future of our young people, rather than giving billions of pounds of tax cuts to large corporations?

Elizabeth Truss: I find it extraordinary that we are being lectured on debt by a party that wants to add half a trillion pounds to our national debt. As I said in my earlier answer, we would still meet our fiscal targets on both the deficit and the debt with the numbers that the ONS currently estimates, but it is very premature to have this discussion when the ONS has not given the detailed figures.

I am willing to respond to the hon. Gentleman’s question about whether we will give a guarantee that this will not affect students—absolutely we will. The Augar review is being conducted on the basis of what is best for students. The fact is that we have one of the best higher education systems in the world, of which we should be rightly proud. We have a record number of students attending university and a record number of students from low-income backgrounds attending university, thanks to our policy.

The hon. Gentleman has to answer this question: is it really right that people who do not go to university and generally earn lower sums of money should subsidise those who do go to university and go on to earn more in later life? We can see the result when that happens—it is what has happened in Scotland. Places end up getting rationed, and higher education ends up not getting enough income.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The House might be gridlocked on Brexit, but it does not need to be gridlocked on more ambitious reform of the higher education finance system. That is what young people want to see. I urge my right hon. Friend to look at the changes that young people want, which are the introduction of maintenance grants and reform of the student finance system away from student debt and towards a graduate contribution, making it better value for money and more progressive—not less progressive, asLabour suggests—so that young people who get the most financially out of going to university pay the most for the chance to go there.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. Friend clearly spent a lot of time working on that when she was Education Secretary, and I commend her on her contribution to that debate. I am pleased to welcome to the Front Bench the new Universities Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), who is leading the work on the Augar review. As Chief Secretary to the Treasury, I am concerned to ensure that we get good value for money and that our universities are properly funded. I am closely involved in supporting the Augar review, as are my colleagues at the Department for Education.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Chief Secretary clearly has not read the UCAS figures, which show that more Scottish young people than ever before are accessing a place in higher education, including more from a deprived background than ever before.

This ruling does not come as any surprise. We already know that England has the highest tuition fees in the industrialised world. It confirms what we have been saying for a long time—this is not saving public money in the long run. This Government remind us regularly of how economically brilliant they are, but we can clearly see that they have been shifting their fiscal responsibilities on to a Government 30 years in the future. The real issue is that these short-term accountancy gains are won off the back of our young people. Average student debt in England is more than £50,000, and continuing to charge fees of more than £9,000 per annum is morally wrong. Since we know that three quarters of student loans will be written off eventually, will the Government follow Scotland’s lead and slash student fees or, better still, abolish them completely?

What assurances can the Chief Secretary give to students trying to pay off debt with spiralling interest rates that the interest on student loans will be capped at a far lower level? For those young people who currently
have debts with no possibility of repayment, will this Government do the right thing and write off the portion of debt that will never be repaid, and write it off now?

Elizabeth Truss: That issue is being considered by the Augar review, which is properly being led by the Secretary of State for Education, who is sitting beside me. From a Treasury perspective, my role is to ensure that we get good value for money from our public finances and that we are fair and transparent in the way we present things. That is what the OBR and the ONS look at.

Mr Speaker: Ah, the key there was a reference to the ONS. It would be helpful if colleagues would frame their questions with reference to the Office for National Statistics, because that is the gravamen of the matter.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): The fact that the ONS has said that student loans will push up the UK’s deficit undoubtedly provides an incentive to reduce fees, but that could create a huge problem for university funding. I hope the Government will take stock and introduce a new system of student finance that does not rely on loans, massive student debt or punitive interest rates, but gives our universities the stable funding they need to thrive.

Elizabeth Truss: The hon. Lady is right that we have well-funded, world-leading universities, and we need to make sure that continues.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Perhaps the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) can offer us a reprise of his masterclass on brevity.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given the provenance of this accounting rule, why did the ONS not get on to it earlier?

Elizabeth Truss: That is a matter for the ONS.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): In the short term, will the Treasury review the inflation-busting 6.3% rate, and in the longer term will the Government admit that feeble wage growth is at the bottom of this problem?

Elizabeth Truss: That is a slightly strange question from the hon. Lady. Given we have just seen the highest real wage growth for 10 years coming through our economy.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that part of the ONS thinking is based on the fact that the amount someone has to earn before they start to repay has been increased very substantially under this Government, saving hundreds of thousands of students £300 or £400 a year? The effect of that, however, is that less of the money is repaid quickly or, indeed, at all.

Elizabeth Truss: My right hon. and learned Friend is right to point out that people do not pay back on their student loan until they are earning £25,000.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): When I went to university 10 years ago, I was the first member of my family to do so, but because I was from a low-income background, I benefited from bursaries,

1.[Official Report, 20 December 2018, Vol. 651, c. 6MC.]
which supported me through education. Unfortunately, Governments in both England and London have cut back bursaries over the past decade, meaning that student loan debt in Scotland is £5 billion this year—up from £1.8 billion 10 years ago, which is a 169% increase—and that the individual debt of a student in Scotland has gone from £5,900 a year to £13,000 a year on average. Do the Government not recognise that such an increase is unsustainable and, reflecting the ONS results, that we have to restore a grant system?

Elizabeth Truss: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman look at the results. The fact is that, since 2009, there has been a 68% increase in the number of low-income students going to university.

Mr Speaker: What the hon. Gentleman for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) conveyed to the House was quite extraordinarily interesting, but most of it did suffer from the notable disadvantage that it did not constitute a question. We got to a question mark very belatedly.

Derek Thomas (St Ives) (Con): The ONS decision actually reminds us that the education of a large number of university students is funded by the taxpayer. That is welcome for those who come from deprived areas and may not earn the £25,000-plus that we would like. Will the Chief Secretary look at fairness across the system, so that people who do not go to university but want to study and train locally can get the skills and opportunities they need?

Elizabeth Truss: Yes, we are looking at that. We are looking across the board at the value for money of Government investment, which is significant in the education system, but also at the impact on individual students.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Chief Secretary to the Treasury has confirmed that this makes no change to the national debt, so can she confirm that the ONS decision will not lead to a new round of spending cuts?

Elizabeth Truss: I have been extremely clear that this is fundamentally an accounting decision. It is not about the reality of the fact that Government debt is being brought back over time, one of our key fiscal targets. The amount the ONS is estimating is, in fact, under our other fiscal target for the deficit. We will do the right thing by students in the Augar review.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the Chief Secretary confirm that the ONS decision is based on the fact that these are not loans in the normal sense—an amount people must pay back—but a contribution towards the cost of their education, with the maximum they are required to pay back being based on their income?

Elizabeth Truss: My hon. Friend is correct. It is a generous system that does support students, particularly those on a low income, but we have instituted the Augar review to look at how the system could be made even better.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): In the light of the ONS decision, can the Chief Secretary tell the House who benefits from the current debt-driven student finance system, because it clearly is not students, taxpayers or the Government?

Elizabeth Truss: There is extremely strong evidence that going to university increases people’s earning power, and there is some very helpful new data—the longitudinal education outcomes data—that shows how much they can expect to earn by studying particular courses.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The ONS has confirmed that this is an accounting trick, which this Government have been happy to use to cover up the true extent of the deficit and the mismanagement of the public finances. If this was in the private sector, the finance director would now be being hauled over the coals. When is the Government’s finance director going to admit that they were wrong, and apologise to both students and the public?
Elizabeth Truss: As I have said, the Government no longer mark their own homework on these issues. It is down to the independent OBR to produce that forecast.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The terms of reference for the Augar review say that “its recommendations must be consistent with the Government’s fiscal policies to reduce the deficit and have debt falling as a percentage of GDP.”

Is it not absolutely clear that this ONS reclassification reduces the resources available to further and higher education?

Elizabeth Truss: I have been very clear that this decision, which is fundamentally an accounting decision, will not affect the outcome of the review.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): This may be an accounting decision, but it clearly does increase the deficit for the Government. With students paying 6.3% interest, 70% of students never paying the full loan back and almost 50% of the loans never paid back at all, who is the current student finance system working for?

Elizabeth Truss: Students.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The ONS decision gives the Chief Secretary an opportunity to tell the House and students who may be watching how she can justify the current Government’s policy of charging a lower interest rate for people promoting tax avoidance schemes when they pay their tax late to the Inland Revenue than the whopping 6.3% charged to students.

Elizabeth Truss: I cannot pre-empt the Augar review, which is currently taking place, of student finance—it will look at some of the issues the hon. Lady has raised—nor can I pre-empt a future fiscal event. This question is somewhat premature, because the ONS has not yet produced its detailed figures on the issue.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): It would seem from the ONS decision that the same sort of mathematical genius has been applied that was applied with Tesconomics a few years ago. Given that 45% of the debt will not be repaid and that a large proportion of the debt is interest, does the Chief Secretary think it is astute and prudent to apply such an extortionate rate of interest—6.3%?

Elizabeth Truss: All aspects of student finance are under consideration in the Augar review, but that is a very different issue from how the ONS classifies various accounting decisions within Government. As I have said, the DFE is leading on the Augar review, and it is addressing those issues.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Can the Chief Secretary now answer the question that has been put by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North ( Wes Streeting), and by my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) on the Front Bench? Can she guarantee that the change in the accounting treatment and the effect on the public finances will not result in a cap on student numbers?

Elizabeth Truss: We do not want to cap student numbers. We have been clear about that as part of the Augar review.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The ONS decision has exposed what many of us have argued since 2010: the Government’s funding system is based on an accounting trick that imposes debt on students and the public purse. The truth is that there is no cost-free way of funding higher education, but the danger is that the Government will respond to the ONS decision by reducing their own liability at the expense of students and universities. Does the Chief Secretary agree that Philip Augar should not be deflected and that we need a comprehensive review of the student funding system that takes account of students from low-income households, part-time and mature students, nurses and midwifery students, and further education?

Elizabeth Truss: That is exactly what the Augar review is doing.
Modernising Defence Programme

1.11 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): In July, I made a statement setting out headline conclusions from six months of work on the modernising defence programme. Since then, work has continued apace. First, I would like to welcome the extra £1.8 billion of funding for defence, including the additional £1 billion that was in last month's Budget. Today, I want to provide a further update on the MDP and set out the work that will be ongoing. I have placed a report on the MDP in the Library of the House.

First, I should put the MDP in context. The 2015 strategic defence and security review was the right plan for defence at the time. The Government put the defence budget on a firmer footing, increasing throughout the life of this Parliament. Defence is much stronger as a result. NATO is growing in strength, and the UK is a leader. More allies are meeting the 2% spending guideline, or have developed plans to do so. We are the second largest defence spender in NATO, one of only a small number of allies to spend 2% of our GDP on defence and to invest 20% of that on upgrading equipment.

We can be proud of what we have achieved since 2015, but we also have to be vigilant. National security challenges have become more complex, intertwined and dangerous since 2015, and those threats are moving much faster than was anticipated. Persistent, aggressive state competition now characterises the international security context. In response to the growing threats, the MDP was launched in January.

In the last year, our armed forces have demonstrated their growing capability, engaged globally, and supported the prosperity of the UK. The Royal Navy has increased its mass and points of presence around the world. We have taken steps to forward-base the Army, enhancing our global posture. The Royal Air Force has continued to innovate, and it celebrated a proud past in RAF 100, marking 100 years since its creation.

Progress has also been made in cyber and space, as the changing character of warfare makes both domains increasingly important. We have reinforced the UK's position as a leading voice in NATO and on European security. Our armed forces have also led the way for global Britain, tackling our adversaries abroad to protect our security at home, and nurturing enduring relationships with our allies and partners.

Through the work over the past year, the MDP has identified three broad priorities, supported by the additional £1.8 billion invested in defence. First, we will mobilise, making more of what we already have to make our current force more lethal and better able to protect our security. The UK already has a world-leading array of capabilities. We will make the most effective use of them. We will improve the readiness and availability of a range of key defence platforms: major warships, attack submarines, helicopters and a range of intelligence, surveillance, target, acquisition and reconnaissance, or ISTAR, platforms.

We are adjusting our overseas training and deployments to increase our global points of presence, better to support allies and influence adversaries. To improve the combat effectiveness of our force, we will reprioritise the current defence programme to increase weapon stockpiles. We are also accelerating work to assure the resilience of our defence systems and capabilities.

We can mobilise a full spectrum of military, economic and soft power capabilities. Where necessary and appropriate, we will make sure we are able to act independently. We will also enhance efforts with our allies and partners, aligning our plans more closely with them, acting as part of combined formations, developing combined capabilities, and burden sharing. We continue to invest in, and grow, our global network of defence personnel and the education and training we offer in the UK and overseas.

Secondly, we will modernise, embracing new technologies to assure our competitive edge. Our adversaries and competitors are accelerating the development of new capabilities and strategies. We must keep pace and conceive of our joint force as consisting of the five domains of air, land, sea, cyber and space, rather than the traditional three.

We must modernise, targeting priority areas. A major new step will involve the improved Joint Forces Command, which will be in a better position both to allow defence to play a major role in preventing conflict in the future and to improve our cyber operations and capabilities across the armed forces, but also across Government.

This year, Defence's innovation fund put £20 million towards projects in areas including unmanned air systems, virtual reality training, and enhanced digital communications for the future commando force. The fund will grow to £50 million in the next financial year, increasing the scope, ambition and value of the projects it can support.

We will launch new spearhead innovation programmes that will apply cutting-edge technologies to areas including sub-surface threats to our submarines; our intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capability; and command and control in the land environment.

To drive innovation and change through the Department, I am launching a transformation fund. Next year, I will ring-fence £160 million of the MOD's budget to create the fund, which will be available for innovative new military capabilities. I will look to make a further £340 million available as part of the spending review. This fund will be available for new innovative military capabilities that allow us to stay one step ahead of our adversaries. Together, these and other steps will enable the acceleration of our modernisation plans.

Thirdly, we will transform, radically changing the way we do business in defence. We need to improve markedly the way we run defence. To sustain strategic advantage in a fast-changing world, we must be capable of continuous and timely adaptation. We will embrace modern business practices and establish a culture that nurtures transformation and innovation. We also need to create financial headroom for modernisation. Based on our work to date, we expect to achieve over the next decade the very demanding efficiency targets that we set in 2015, including through investment in a programme of digital transformation. We will develop a comprehensive strategy to improve recruitment and retention of talent, better reflecting the expectations of the modern workforce. We will access more effectively the talents of our whole force across all three services, and regulars, reserves, civil service and industry partners.
Looking ahead, dealing effectively with persistent conflict and competition will increasingly hinge on smarter and better informed long-range strategy. To help to achieve those goals we will establish a permanent net assessment unit, as well as a defence policy board of external experts, to bring challenge to defence policy and strategy. Our achievements under the MDP have made defence stronger. The capability investments and policy approaches set out, with the extra £1.8 billion of defence funding, will help us to keep on track to deliver the right UK defence for the challenging decade ahead.

Without a shadow of a doubt, there is a lot more work to be done as we move towards next year’s spending review. We must sustain this momentum if we are to realise our long-term goals of increasing the lethality, reach and mass of our armed forces. I will do everything I can to make sure that the UK remains a tier one military power in the decade ahead, and that we continue to deliver the strong defence and security that has been the hallmark of the Government. I commend this statement to the House.

1.21 pm

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and for advance sight of it.

I know that Members will be relieved that the review has finally been published—all 28 pages of it, 10 of which are photos or graphics—some six months after it was originally promised, because we all recognise the growing and diverse threats this country faces. However, given the amount of time it has taken, given the endless reports of the Secretary of State’s rows with various Cabinet colleagues, and given his commitment in the summer that this would lead to “a major programme of top-down transformative reform”—[Official Report, 19 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 28WS.],
it is staggering that the end result is so underwhelming.

The review does nothing to solve the affordability crisis facing the Ministry of Defence, a crisis that the Secretary of State has completely failed to get to grips with in his year in office.

The Secretary of State promised that the review would not be fiscally neutral. The Minister for Defence Procurement promised that it would “put UK defence on to an enduringly affordable footing”—[Official Report, 5 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 44WS.],
but I ask the Secretary of State how can it, when it includes no new money? Despite the £1 billion that was announced in the Budget, the MOD’s own figures show that the funding gap in the defence equipment plan alone is somewhere between £7 billion and £15 billion. That leads to a very simple choice: either the Government must come forward with enough additional funds to fill that gap, which the Secretary of State has completely failed to do, or he must be honest about the difficult choices that have to be made.

We know that 84% of the MOD’s funding gap occurs in the next four years. According to the National Audit Office, that means that Ministers must make “immediate savings decisions rather than relying on longer-term cuts or efficiencies”.

Can the Secretary of State tell us what those decisions are? Which programmes has he decided to defer, de-scop or delete? We all agree with the need to make savings wherever possible, but the MOD’s over-reliance on projected efficiencies which do not materialise has been a persistent problem. Will he accept that sorting the mess in his Department’s budget cannot simply be done through efficiencies?

Turning to the announcement of a transformation fund to develop new and innovative technologies, something one would assume his Department was doing in any case, can the Secretary of State confirm that the £160 million that has been earmarked comes from existing budgets and there will be no new money? What assurances has he received from the Chancellor that the remaining £340 million that is not currently in his budget will in fact be forthcoming?

Personnel are at the very heart of our country’s defences. Last week, the NAO published a damning report on the Army’s recruitment contract with Capita, the latest reminder that this company is failing badly and that MOD is failing abysmally to manage that contract properly. Ministers have made endless promises to take action to deal with this problem, but nothing has been done. Does the Secretary of State accept that it is now time to scrap that contract and take the service back in-house?

The news that the UK will not now be able to participate in the secure aspects of the Galileo programme is immensely concerning, as is the Government’s failure to answer straightforward questions about where the funds for the proposed UK satellite system will come from. In light of that, and with only two sitting days remaining, can the Secretary of State confirm that it is still his intention to publish a space strategy by the end of the year, or is this yet another decision that the Government will be deferring?

On the Labour Benches, we have always accepted the principle of the review. Threats have evolved since 2015 and our response must adapt as well. We recognise the importance of interoperability and burden-sharing with allies to maximise the UK’s defence capability for the future, but at a time when this country faces ever-increasing threats we do not believe that the Department’s affordability crisis can simply be ignored. That is just grossly irresponsible.

Gavin Williamson: In one breath the hon. Lady criticises people for fighting for defence and trying to get the very best for their Department, and then she does not even recognise the fact that the Government are investing more and more in defence. Last year, the defence budget was £36 billion. Next year, we will have a budget of £39 billion and the Government have committed to spend an extra £1.8 billion over and above on defence. Those are all incredibly positive steps. If we look at the debate we were having last year it was about capability cuts. That is what the speculation was about. We are not making those capability cuts and we are investing in defence.

The hon. Lady says we put too much emphasis on efficiencies. It is right to expect every Department to look at how it can run things more efficiently. We have achieved 70% of our efficiency target. Over the next 10 years, we hope and believe we can achieve all of our target. We remain positive that that is something we can deliver.

On Galileo, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy will be introducing a report in the early part of next year on satellite strategy, but I do not
think it makes sense to continue to hand over money to the European Union in terms of a satellite programme that we will not have access to or industrial benefit from. That money can be better spent with other allies in developing our own capabilities.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: There is much interest in this statement, but I want to point out to the House that there is a Standing Order No. 24 debate to follow and then the Second Reading of a Bill. There is, therefore, a premium upon brevity and I am keen to move on at, or extremely close to, two o'clock. Some people might not get in on this statement.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Very briefly in that case, Mr Speaker, does the Secretary of State accept that as we have not seen the actual document it would be useful to have a debate at an early stage? Will he accept the thanks, I think, of the whole House for having saved the amphibious capability of the Royal Marines? Does he feel, in this era of slightly looser Cabinet joint collective responsibility or whatever they care to call it, that he might accept the fact that the Defence Committee’s target ultimately of a return to 3% of GDP is what is really needed in terms of defence expenditure?

Gavin Williamson: My right hon. Friend always tries to tempt me with that question. I read his report with interest. He makes a point about an early debate. That would certainly be very welcome. I will make representations to the usual channels to see if that can be granted.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

When the modernising defence programme was announced over a year ago, it was supposed to be a sustainable and affordable defence settlement. It fails on both of those challenges. It is of course welcome that the Secretary of State managed to announce some pots of funding today, but the £1.8 billion he references is only for this year alone. That hardly shows the mark of a sustainable programme. It is also remarkable that he accepts the fact that the Defence Committee’s target ultimately of a return to 3% of GDP is what is really needed in terms of defence expenditure?

Gavin Williamson: That is incredibly charming of my right hon. Friend. Over the last year, we have seen a commitment right across the Government from both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to getting increased funding for defence, and that is to be welcomed. This keeps coming back to the simple fact that last year’s defence budget was £36 billion and next year’s will be £39 billion with the extra money that has been secured, but it is about investing in the capabilities and making sure that our armed forces have the mass and lethality that they need to keep us safe.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I welcome the fact that there were no cuts in capability. The Secretary of State has held the line, and he will now go into battle against the Chancellor for more resources in the comprehensive spending review. Given the Chancellor’s legendary tact—the other day, he attacked over half of Tory Back Benchers for being extremists—I tell the Secretary of State that if he now goes toe to toe with the Chancellor for more defence spending, he will have 117 allies that he did not know he had.

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about trying to reach a framework that goes multi-year. That would certainly assist with making investment decisions, and that is obviously part of the ongoing discussions that we would have right across Government. It is a valid and thoughtful point, but let us not underestimate the importance of what we have been able to achieve, with the extra £1.8 billion of investment in our armed forces. This means that we are able to make investment to make sure that our nuclear deterrent has the proper security that it needs. We can make the investment in anti-submarine activity and we can continue to make the investment that we need to counter cyber-attacks, both defensively and offensively. However, we recognise that there will be continued challenges. That is why the extra money that has been secured gives us the opportunity to start making the investment that is required for us to have, and continue to have, the world’s best armed forces.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): If military strength was based on management-speak and general waffle, the Secretary of State’s statement would make us a world-beater, but the reality he asks us to face is that since 2015, we have a smaller Army, with recruitment targets missed, ships in dock because they cannot have crews, efficiency targets met, and a £15 billion black hole in his equipment plan. When is the real money going to come forward, rather than the general waffle that he has put forward today?

Gavin Williamson: As I have pointed out, we are seeing an increasing budget. What we are doing, as we have outlined, is investing in those capabilities to make sure that we have better availability of assets, whether that means ships, armoured vehicles, submarines or aircraft. We are also investing in stockpiles to make sure that we have the depth of stockpiles that we need in order to deal with the increasing threats around the globe.
Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is excellent news to hear that the transformation fund will be set up, because that will ensure that the Department can really start to prioritise how that key funding is spent effectively. Will the Secretary of State tell us how he intends to prioritise that funding, and does he have three top priorities that he can share with us?

Gavin Williamson: The first is to make sure that we develop both the technologies and capabilities where we see our adversaries moving so quickly. That may be artificial intelligence or autonomous vehicles. Secondly, it is to make sure that our forces are properly ready and able to have a much better forward presence right around the globe. We want to use our armed forces as a deterrent against our adversaries so they can see that we are willing and able to act if and when it is required. Thirdly, it is to make sure that we look after the service personnel who make up our armed forces and that we put in the right investment to make sure that they are properly supported in doing the amazing job that they do in defending our country.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): This has been a supposedly urgent and immediate review, which has taken over 12 months. It has dismissed the strategic defence and security review and we have been waiting for proper decisions to be made, yet we have seen none today. Will the Secretary of State confirm that what we are now waiting for is the CSR next year?

Gavin Williamson: What we would agree with is that the SDSR 2015 clearly identified the challenges that this country faces, but we also recognise that our adversaries are investing in new technology, so we have put in place the ability for us to start investing more money in those technologies. The hon. Lady rightly points out that the comprehensive spending review is going to be very important to the Department to make sure that we get the right investment going forward.

Leo Docherty (Aldershot) (Con): The innovation at the heart of the MDP is very welcome, but it is very important that innovation is not just a slogan and that it delivers increased fighting power for our armed forces. Can the Secretary of State give an example of how innovation will increase the fighting power of our armed forces?

Gavin Williamson: We have recently seen, in Exercise Saif Sareea in Oman, how we have used traditional technologies, such as tanks, in conjunction with drones to be able to enhance their ability to operate in such areas. We are also looking at investment to secure our submarines to make sure that they continue to remain undetected and are in the best position to detect others and at enhancing the capabilities of jets such as the Typhoon. These are all areas in which we are looking at making extra investment. It is also important that we make that extra investment because it increases the exportability of some of these products and capabilities that we have around the globe.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): No matter what platforms we buy or capability we have, if we do not have the personnel, we have no military capability. We have a major shortfall—according to the National Audit Office, between 21% and 45% of our armed forces is not being recruited. What will we be doing to ensure that we not only have the platforms, but the people with the skills my and the training to ensure that we have the capability to move forward?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Lady’s point is very valid. That is why I said that one of the key priorities is looking after the service personnel who serve in our armed forces. This is not just about recruitment, but about retention and looking at how we make the offer better and attract people who have left the services back into them. However, the recruitment issue that she highlighted is one on which we have already initiated a number of pilot programmes to make sure that we get the numbers of people applying to join our armed forces and shorten the amount of time that it takes from their application to them joining the armed forces.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend on securing significant additional resources for the vital work that is done by the MOD. Does he agree that that will provide reassurance to the men and women in our armed forces that the Government are prepared to put their interests first and that the UK will continue to invest in world-leading innovation, much of which is done by companies in my constituency?

Gavin Williamson: My hon. Friend points out an important part of this—investment in new technologies—and if we look at the future combat air strategy and Tempest, we see that the ability for us to invest in new technologies so that we have a successor for the Typhoon aircraft is absolutely vital and incredibly important. If we look at some of the speculation that was going around the Chamber this time last year about us, there was speculation that we were going to be getting rid of the amphibious platforms, Albion and Bulwark, and that we were going to be reducing the number of frigates and destroyers. There was a lot of speculation, and what this quite clearly says is that that is something we are not going to be doing.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): We all know about Russia’s aggressive behaviour in the sea of Azov and the Black sea. What does the Secretary of State’s statement mean for countering that aggressive behaviour and demonstrating our support for the sovereignty of Ukraine?

Gavin Williamson: We must remember that we have a friend in Ukraine, a nation whose sovereign territory has been invaded and which has seen the seizure of Crimea and, of course, incursions to the east. The Government must work continuously with Ukraine, giving it the support that it needs. In Operation Orbital, we have been stepping up our support for the Ukrainian Government, and the Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Gordon Messenger, was in Ukraine recently discussing what further assistance we could offer. We have also recently signed a defence agreement with the Ukrainian Government, and we will see how we can provide that extra support. What is so important is a clear deterrence to prevent Russia from infringing any further sovereign territory of Ukraine.
John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): In order to be the architect of modernisation, will my right hon. Friend be bidding for some of the £39 billion Brexit bonus bonanza if we do not pass the withdrawal agreement?

Gavin Williamson: I could possibly be tempted.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Secretary of State spoke of no cuts in capability. Can he explain how a declining number of service personnel is not a cut in capability?

Gavin Williamson: As I have said, we have already taken a number of actions to drive up recruitment in our armed forces while also increasing retention. Service personnel have gone out into the streets to be part of a recruitment process that had not taken place for the last few years since the decision was taken to withdraw them. An increasing number of people are applying for all three services; what we need to do is convert that into those who are joining them.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): The modernising defence programme is partly about improving the resilience of our defence and our country. Has the Secretary of State now guarantee the future size of the Royal Marines, it will have failed. Will the Secretary of State guarantee the future size of the Royal Marines, it will have failed. Will the Secretary of State guarantee the future size of the Royal Marines, it will have failed. Will the Secretary of State guarantee the future size of the Royal Marines, it will have failed. Will the Secretary of State guarantee the future size of the Royal Marines, it will have failed.

Gavin Williamson: As yet, we have received no formal requests from any Department, but we are making contingency plans. We will ensure that 3,500 service personnel, including regulars and reserves, are held in readiness to support any Department with contingency needs.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): The Secretary of State is right to push for more creativity in thinking about the future capability of our underwater environment, but is it not time for him to confirm that that will be based on a submarine platform?

Gavin Williamson: The hon. Gentleman tempts me to do so, but it is fair to say that our investment in submarines is currently vast, involving both the Astute and Dreadnought programmes. We want to think about innovation, and how we can best tap into the skills that are held by BAE Systems and the people of Barrow to develop the platforms that will succeed Astute, and we hope to be able to update the hon. Gentleman and the House on how we expect to do that in the not too distant future.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement, including his confirmation that there will be additional funds for the Ministry of Defence next year. I also welcome what he said about capabilities. Will he take this opportunity to tell us how he sees defence contributing to the prosperity of the United Kingdom with that extra money, and also to dispel some of the myths that are spreading outside this place about the future relationship between the MOD and the EU in respect of security matters?

Gavin Williamson: I thank my hon. Friend for his review on promoting prosperity through defence. Investment in capabilities, whether it involves ships, jets or land vehicles, is a real driver in the creation of jobs and investment, and the MOD is one of the largest departmental investors in science. We want to think about how we can leverage that more and more. We have seen some fantastic orders over the last year, including a £5 billion order from Qatar and a £20 billion order from Australia for a new frigate. Another great success has been the potential for a large order from the Canadians. However, we will continue to ensure prosperity is at the very heart of everything that we do. Some of the best examples of what British products can achieve is demonstrated through what our armed forces do with them.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The report on the modernising defence programme, which I endorsed as a member of the Defence Committee, said:

“The force structure that emerges from the MDP must be supported by a robust and sustainable financial settlement”.

Can the Secretary of State point sceptics like myself in the direction of the section of the report that he has placed in the Library, so that we can judge for ourselves whether his Department seems likely to deliver the “sustainable and affordable” settlement that he promised a year ago?

Gavin Williamson: We have already made it absolutely clear that the defence budget will increase, and that by 2021 it will amount to £40 billion. That is a commitment that has been made by my party, and we are delivering on it. It would be interesting to hear what defence spending commitments Opposition parties are willing to make.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): I was delighted to welcome the Secretary of State to RM Condor in Angus to see our fantastic training facility at first hand, and to see how it can be supported. I strongly believe that RM Condor should not only remain an integral part of the UK defence estate but be strengthened. I should be grateful if, ahead of the review, the Secretary of State would assure me that he too understands the importance of RM Condor in Angus.

Gavin Williamson: Having had the opportunity to visit Condor—I know that my hon. Friend has led an Adjournment debate on it—I recognise its importance to our capabilities, and also the spread of UK armed forces in every part of the United Kingdom. However, I should be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the matter in further detail.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): As Devonport’s Member of Parliament, I have been fighting the Government’s proposed cuts to our amphibious ships and our Royal Marines since my election. If the MDP does not guarantee the future of the Royal Marines, it will have failed. Will the Secretary of State now guarantee the future size of the Royal Marines, and will he ensure that the superbase in Plymouth to which his predecessors have committed themselves will be part of his plan for the future?

Gavin Williamson: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman welcomes the fact that we are ensuring that we maintain that important amphibious capability in HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark. We have recognised the vital role
played by the Royal Marines in everything that our armed forces do. When it comes to some of the challenges around the globe, whether they are close to home or further afield, the Royal Marines will always play an important role. We will continue to invest in the Royal Marines, and in the whole of the Royal Navy—there has been the great announcement of the basing of Type 26s at Devonport—and we will continue to consider how best to deliver the training of Royal Marines in the future.

**James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to seek to maximise our existing capability by mobilising it more often, but can he reassure us that the reduced tour intervals that will result from that increased operational tempo will not limit opportunities for meaningful peacetime training, and also that the wider package that supports the military community will be sufficiently improved to ensure that retention does not suffer as a consequence of that higher tempo?

**Gavin Williamson**: We will always do everything that we can to meet the guidelines that we set out in order to ensure that service personnel on active duty have the rest and recuperation that they need, because we recognise that if we do not do that, we will start to have problems with retention.

**Vernon Coaker** (Gedling) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State accept that there is an affordability gap in the MOD’s published equipment plan? How will he close that gap, and what choices is he considering in case he receives no extra funds from the Chancellor?

**Gavin Williamson**: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we have had increases in our budget, along with increased commitments from the Treasury to support what we are doing. We are looking at how we can drive further efficiencies in order to ensure that we deliver the frontline capabilities. There has been much talk about the affordability gap, but it has been declining year on year, and that is something that we hope to be able to continue to achieve.

**Mrs Anne Main** (St Albans) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that our party is absolutely committed to maintaining our nuclear deterrent? I think that many Conservative Members fear that the Labour party would make its funding cuts by cutting it.

**Gavin Williamson**: What is clear is that if we want a party that will come to the defence of our armed forces, invest more money in our armed forces and ensure that we continue to keep a nuclear deterrent, it is the Conservative party that will always do that.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): The Conservative party has a dogma about outsourcing everything possible to the private sector even when there are clear failures, as there are with the Capita contract around recruitment. So will the Secretary of State admit now that doing that is failing the armed forces and taxpayers?

**Gavin Williamson**: We will always look at new models and new ideas for how to deliver the best services for our service personnel, which they rely on so much. We do use outsourcing, as the Labour Government previously did, and we will continue to do so, but we will continue to look at how we drive the best value and, most importantly, the best quality of service.

**Douglas Ross** (Moray) (Con): The Defence Secretary mentioned in his statement the proud history of the RAF in this year in particular, but he will also know it has a very bright future as well, especially in Moray at RAF Lossiemouth. Will he update the House on the progress being made ahead of the arrival of the P-8s and congratulate the local construction firm Robertson on its outstanding work?

**Gavin Williamson**: I congratulate Robertson on the work it is doing. We are making a £400 million investment in RAF Lossiemouth, one of the biggest investments of its kind anywhere in the UK, and I know my hon. Friend has fought hard to get that level of investment in his constituency. This is not just about creating armed forces jobs in his constituency; it also has a wide-ranging benefit to the whole economy that brings prosperity to the whole region.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Both the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee have asked serious questions about the Department’s ability to deliver savings, keep projects on track and remain within budget. As the MDP adds even more entries to the list of tasks expected of our service personnel, may I ask where the cuts will come from and when we can expect to see that list, should the Department not be able to win more money from the Chancellor?

**Gavin Williamson**: We have made clear that we are not looking at making capability cuts in the MDP; we have been looking at how we invest in our armed forces and new capabilities.

**Robert Courts** (Witney) (Con): The Secretary of State is right that retention is a challenge. Mindful of the use of reservists at Brize Norton, particularly in the AirTanker programme, will he consider expanding the use of reservists in the RAF?

**Gavin Williamson**: We always look at how we can expand the use of reservists. Their use is critical to what we do in so many of our defence functions, and we should not see them as separate from what our armed forces do; they are absolutely critical and will always be so.

**Darren Jones** (Bristol North West) (Lab): I declare my interests.

Will the Secretary of State set out what his Department is doing, ideally on a multilateral basis, to ensure the ethical use of autonomous and artificial intelligence systems announced in his statement today?

**Gavin Williamson**: We will be working closely with all our allies to make sure we have the highest standards in the use of autonomous and AI technology going forward, and we will be looking at entering into legal commitments on that.

**Mr Philip Hollobone** (Kettering) (Con): One of the strengths of NATO is the shared use of common 5.56 mm calibre ammunition, which is crucial for the interoperability
of infantry weapons systems. What are the implications for the British MDP if the Americans go ahead with their plans to switch to 6.8 mm for their assault weaponry?

Gavin Williamson: We would not expect to see that right across all US armed forces, but the US has consistently been our closest ally and we would work very closely with it by having discussions as to how to continue to share the interoperability that we have always benefited from for the last 70 years.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We now need extremely short, single-sentence questions and replies.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): With the splendid isolationism of Brexit and an obsession with nuclear weapons, is there not a danger that the British state will become the European version of North Korea?

Gavin Williamson: No chance at all.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): There are serious concerns regarding manpower, particularly in the Royal Navy; how will the MDP address them?

Gavin Williamson: We are going back and looking at how we do recruitment better—how we go out and get more people applying for our armed forces, and how we make sure their applications are dealt with swiftly—and we have been seeing an increase. We have also been looking at how to inspire a new generation of young people to join our armed forces. We employ more apprentices than any other Government Department; there are over 20,000 people on apprenticeships with the MOD, and we hope to have more.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State says that we need to save money. Here is one suggestion: shipbuilding orders of £7.5 billion will potentially be going out of this country between now and 2030. If those ships were built in the UK, that would save the Treasury 20%. Will the Secretary of State go to the Treasury and make the demand to build those ships in the UK?

Gavin Williamson: We are encouraging all British shipyards to bid for all ships that we will be procuring.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend commit to supporting the small and medium-sized enterprises that lead much of the innovation in the defence tech sector?

Gavin Williamson: It is important to recognise that some of the technology that will lead innovation in defence comes not from the large primes but from SMEs, and the question of how we can best tap into that is absolutely critical.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I have repeatedly raised with the Government the closure of important military bases such as Redford barracks in my constituency and not got a satisfactory reply. Will the Secretary of State now pledge to look again at the better defence estate plan?

Gavin Williamson: The MOD is a major employer in Scotland, employing over 14,000 people, and more than 11,000 jobs depend on orders from the MOD. We will continue to invest in Scotland in the future.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): Thousands of jobs in Stevenage rely on defence spending. Is the Secretary of State confident that this programme will ensure those jobs are secured into the future?

Gavin Williamson: The investment in stockpiles in particular will have a very positive effect for businesses producing ordinance for the armed forces, such as MBDA.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: A single sentence, Mr Shannon.

Jim Shannon: Does the Secretary of State not believe that there will be cuts to civilian staff of 30% from extensive outsourcing, and that that would leave a massive gap in support staff and have an adverse effect on the MOD and the defence budget?

Mr Speaker: Very well done.

Gavin Williamson: I do not believe it will have any adverse effect at all.

Rebecca Pow rose—

Mr Speaker: The same challenge.

Rebecca Pow: Can the Secretary of State confirm that no cuts will be made to the Marines, and may I reiterate my invitation to him to visit 40 Commando in Taunton to see how effective it is and how much money it has invested recently, and how consolidating its position in Taunton would help the defence capability of the nation?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady can now breathe.

Gavin Williamson: I am very much looking forward to visiting 40 Commando, and we have no intention of cutting the Royal Marines.
Points of Order

1.57 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Following the Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition’s point of order yesterday announcing the motion of no confidence, which is in the remaining orders and notices, you will recall that the motion states: “That this House has no confidence in the Prime Minister due to her failure to allow the House of Commons to have a meaningful vote straight away.”

Her Majesty’s Opposition have not heard whether the Government will be making a statement or tabling a business of the House motion to deal with that motion. The Prime Minister refused to ensure that a meaningful vote took place on the date that she agreed, she refuses to allow a vote to take place this week, and she is delaying a vote until 14 January 2019. This is an affront to this House and to the British people.

The motion is clear that this is the Prime Minister’s failure. The Government have not had the courtesy to come to the House to inform right hon. and hon. Members whether there will be a debate on the motion. It appears that the Government have made an announcement to everyone except this House.

May I have your guidance, Mr Speaker, on whether you have heard from the Government about whether they have agreed to find time for the no-confidence motion, and whether you heard before everyone else that the Government are not allowing a debate on the motion?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving me advance notice of her intended point of order. The short answer to her question is that I have had no such indication from the Government that they have any intention of acceding to the request for a debate on the motion, although I have no doubt that her plea has been heard on the Treasury Bench. For the avoidance of doubt and in the name of better public understanding of our procedures, I should make it clear that there is a strong convention that the Government provide time at an early opportunity for a no-confidence motion in Her Majesty’s Government if tabled by the official Opposition. However—and this is important—no such convention applies in relation to this particular motion, which is not a conventional no-confidence motion. So that is where things stand at present and I do not think I can add anything further, but the hon. Lady has put her point on the record.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Is it not true that the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 makes it absolutely clear that, if Her Majesty’s Opposition were to table a motion of no confidence in the Government, an immediate debate would have to be held? Indeed, if the Opposition had tabled such a motion last night, we would now be discussing a motion of no confidence in the Government. The problem for the leader of the Labour party is that he does not want an immediate motion of no confidence because if, as is likely, it were to be lost, he would be forced by his party to go for a referendum. The Opposition are playing games.

Mr Speaker: I will not get into secondary matters that the hon. Gentleman has raised, but I can confirm that his exegesis of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act is broadly correct. I am not surprised by that; I would expect nothing less from him, as he is an experienced parliamentarian. He is right on that front.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In the light of your rulings just now, could you clarify whether it is possible for any hon. Member to table a motion of no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government? You will know that many of us are unhappy with the way in which Her Majesty’s Government have been conducting themselves, and that we are frustrated that a motion stating “This House has no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government” has not been tabled.

Mr Speaker: It is open to other Members to table such a motion, but there is a difference between tabling a motion and having the assurance of time for a debate on it.

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. Is there a precedent for motions of no confidence in the Prime Minister? What has been the response to such motions in the past? I seek your guidance on taking this forward.

Mr Speaker: Forgive me—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is seeking counsel, but I feel that I have already set out the position clearly. That is to say that there is a well-established procedure that has, in a sense, been underpinned and reinforced by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. That procedure allows for an official Opposition motion of no confidence in the Government to be allocated time for debate and a vote. The particular motion that has recently been tabled expresses no confidence on the part of the House in the Prime Minister, but it does not express no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government, and it is therefore not automatically eligible for debate in the same way that a conventional no-confidence motion would be. Moreover, as I have explained to the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), it is perfectly open to other Members to seek to table no confidence in the Government motions, but they do not have the same status as a motion from Her Majesty’s official Opposition. I hope that that is clear to colleagues.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con) rose—

Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Well, if the right hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Anna Soubry) really must. I will come to the hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey). We are keeping him waiting, but I am sure he will be worth waiting for.

Anna Soubry: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I put on record how much I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh) on his point of order? This might be a first, but it is an important one. Have you had any communication with Her Majesty’s Opposition to assist them with the correct procedure? Is it not the case that you and your
excellent Clerks are always available to Her Majesty's Opposition, should they seek any information or advice on how to conduct themselves as a proper, functioning Opposition?

Mr Speaker: The Chair is always available to offer advice if it is sought. I sometimes proffer advice when it is not sought, but I do not unfailingly do so.

James Heappey rose—

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: I think we should keep the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) waiting, because the hon. Member for Wells was first.

James Heappey: Mr Speaker, my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe got my question in before me.

Mr Speaker: Such self-denial and courtesy—quite legendary!

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Further to the point of order from the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Mr Leslie), Mr Speaker. Is it possible for a Back-Bench MP to table a motion of no confidence in Her Majesty's Opposition, given the mess they have made of tabling a motion of no confidence? They have confused even their own Back Benchers over the difference between a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister and a motion of no confidence in the Government. They have made an utter shambles of the entire process. So can we have two motions of no confidence: one in the Government and one in that lot over there?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that I am not aware of any precedent for what he cheekily suggests. However, I would say to him that it is perfectly open to Members to table early-day motions. He is nothing if not an adroit and assiduous Member of the House and, if my memory serves me correctly, he is not entirely unfamiliar with that device.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Further to the points of order raised by my hon. Friends, Mr Speaker. We on this side of the House are seeking to table a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister with the objective of bringing forward the meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement and of holding the Prime Minister to account for her failure. That was the objective of that measure. Failing having an opportunity to do that, what other measures are available to the House, which has held the Government in contempt, to bring forward that meaningful vote expeditiously?

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that the art of persuasion is, I think, the only approach that could possibly succeed in bringing forward that vote. I have explained what the powers of the Chair are, and what they are not. I quite understand that many Members would like to get on with the conclusion of that debate—or with the beginning, continuation and conclusion of it if it is an entirely new debate—followed by the vote, but it is not for the Chair to bring that about. The hon. Gentleman asks how he could bring it about, and I think the answer is through the art of persuasion and the use of the charm and guile for which he is well renowned, at least in his own constituency and perhaps beyond.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Has the Northern Ireland Secretary indicated to you that she intends to come to the Dispatch Box as a matter of urgency to respond to reports over the past 48 hours that the Irish Government have concluded a specific mapping exercise along the entire length of the 300-mile land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and that they have concluded that there are considerably in excess of the 200 crossing points that they had previously established to be in place? They have now indicated that the number is approximately the same as the number that I and others have suggested, thereby negating any requirement whatsoever for a backstop, given that a hard border would be a total and utter impossibility.

Mr Speaker: The short answer is that I have received no such indication from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. She is among the most courteous Members of the House, and I feel sure that if she were planning to make a statement I would have got wind of it. The hon. Gentleman beetled up to the Chair to raise this matter with me earlier, and I indicated that it was perfectly legitimate for him to raise it by way of a point of order. In the absence of any commitment to a statement, if he feels that this is a pressing matter that warrants the urgent attention of the House tomorrow, for example, he knows what resources and devices are available to him.

BILL PRESENTED

EUROPEAN UNION (REVOCATION OF NOTIFICATION OF WITHDRAWAL) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Geraint Davies, supported by Dr Sarah Wollaston, Mr David Lammy, Peter Grant, Tom Brake and Liz Saville Roberts, presented a Bill to require the Prime Minister to revoke the notification, under Article 50(2) of the Treaty on European Union, of the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the European Union unless two conditions are met; to establish as the first condition for non-revocation that a withdrawal agreement has been approved by Parliament by 21 January 2019 or during an extension period agreed by that date under Article 50(3) of the Treaty on European Union; to establish as the second condition for non-revocation that a majority of participating voters have voted in favour of that agreement in a referendum in which the United Kingdom remaining as a member of the European Union was the other option; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019, and to be printed (Bill 306).
EU Withdrawal Agreement

Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

2.9 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the outcome of the Prime Minister’s recent discussions with the European Commission and European Heads of Government regarding the Withdrawal Agreement, and potential ways forward.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Go back to Skye.

Ian Blackford: Well, there we are. I do not know whether that was picked up by the microphone, but “Go back to Skye” has just been chuntered from a sedentary position. There is the message to the people of Scotland from the Conservative Benches, and the people of Scotland will reflect on the ignorance and arrogance shown by so-called hon. Members. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this debate on this specific and important matter. Not I nor anybody else will be going back to the Isle of Skye, because we will be in this place standing up for our constituents.

I recognise that the Prime Minister made a statement to the House yesterday, but this matter requires further discussion and examination. It is disappointing in the least that the Prime Minister is not here to listen and to respond to this debate. This debate has been won by the leader of the third party in the House of Commons. Where is the respect from the Prime Minister? Why is the Prime Minister not in her place to defend the inaction of her Government? It is an outrage that the Prime Minister does not have the gall to come to this House to debate such important matters. It is an insult to the people of Scotland and to the people of this House.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Will the public not find it strange that the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has been asked to come here to talk about a Council meeting that he did not even attend?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is correct. We have to understand the seriousness of the situation. The entire United Kingdom runs the risk of crashing out of the European Union on the basis that the Prime Minister and the Government are trying to deny this House the opportunity to have a vote. Given that we have secured this timely debate, it is vital that the Prime Minister recognises the importance of being here and ensuring that she can respond.

We are in uncharted territory. The Government were found in contempt of Parliament, and the Prime Minister faces weekly resignations, barely surviving a vote of confidence from her own party. She is still in office but not in control. Perhaps more troubling, we are three months away from leaving the European Union and we are sleepwalking towards disaster. There is no majority for the Prime Minister’s deal. We know that today the Cabinet was discussing a no-deal scenario—which very few would support—yet with the Prime Minister deferring a meaningful vote to the middle of January and the process of determining our future having to be agreed by 21 January, we run the risk of crashing out of the EU almost by accident. Having a meaningful vote on 14 January, with only a week thereafter for this House to agree an alternative, is playing with fire.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech, which started off with great heat. If he wants to protect Scotland and protect constituencies that are concerned with business, such as mine, he should vote for this deal. Is he not trying to drive us over the edge? Is it not the Scottish Government who want to see us driven over the edge with no deal?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman should reflect on the fact that the Scottish National party, the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens in the Scottish Parliament voted to ensure that Scotland’s voice is heard. The determination of the people of Scotland was clear that we want to be in the European Union, but we have deaf ears from the hon. Gentleman, who fails and refuses to stand up for the people of Scotland. That is the reality.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I am going to make some progress. Our constituents will not thank us for putting the UK in such a situation that we have one week from voting down the Prime Minister’s deal to save the UK from a no-deal scenario. That is why we need this debate today. More importantly, however, we need a meaningful vote this week, not in the middle of January. The Prime Minister is playing a dangerous game of trying to lock us out of any alternative and make it a binary choice between her deal or no deal. It is the height of irresponsibility, treating this place and the electorate with contempt.

We must be honest with ourselves and, more importantly, with the public. There is no such thing as a good Brexit. The Government’s analysis shows that we will be better off staying in the European Union compared with any of the Brexit options. Put simply, we are risking growth, job opportunities and prosperity, but why? We are told by the Prime Minister that it is because we must respect the referendum result. Well, when the facts change, our opinions can also change. We must be straight with those who voted leave or remain that we now know that there is a price to be paid for Brexit, such as job losses. Putting people on the dole is not a price worth paying. No Government worthy of that name are fit for purpose if they countenance such a scenario. It is an abrogation of responsibility.

We know that billions are being spent on no-deal planning. That money could have been spent on the NHS, on education, on transport and so on, but it is having to be spent on no-deal planning. What a waste it is that the Government think that that is appropriate. Money that should be spent on the frontline is being spent elsewhere because of the dogma of right-wing Brexit.

Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Is it not a very real possibility that the Prime Minister is pulling the wool over her Back Benchers’ eyes? They know that she is running down the clock, and they think that she may be going to no deal, but a catalogue...
of people in her party and her Government have described no deal as a catastrophe. What is going to happen is that she will look down the barrel of no deal and then end up revoking article 50, and there will be hell on the Tory Benches when she does.

Ian Blackford: We are trying to ensure that we have a meaningful vote this week to ensure that this House votes down both the Prime Minister’s plan and no deal. We can then move on to the alternatives and the solutions. The fact that the Prime Minister is risking catastrophe is unacceptable.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I will make a bit of progress and then take interventions later.

Many of us have been given briefings on Privy Council terms on the immediate impact of no deal. I am not allowed to share the details with the House, although I will say that the information that was shared with me should now be made public. It is sobering. The first job of any Government is to protect the interests of their people. This Government are wilfully exposing their citizens to risk, whether on job security, the procurement of medicines or food supply, or on aircraft being able to take off. It saddens me that I point the finger of blame fairly and squarely at this Government and at the Prime Minister.

We must wake up to the impact of Brexit and to the options that are in front of us. Some MPs, working on a cross-party basis, want to break the logjam. The SNP has been working with the Liberals Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Greens, and I commend them for their desire to work on a cross-party basis. Members from the Labour party and, indeed, the Conservative party have also spoken out to support a people’s vote. I know that there are many others in the Labour party and the Conservatives who want a people’s vote. I understand party loyalty, but the issue today is one of loyalty to the electorate and to the individual nations that make up the United Kingdom. Now is the time to stand up and be counted. This is a constitutional crisis, and each and every one of us has an individual responsibility. Parliament will not be forgiven by many of our young people if we allow the greatest example of economic self-harm in modern times to take place.

Turning to the Leader of the Opposition, I do this from a position of sorrow, because I believe him to be a man of great principle, but I must say to him that he has become the midwife for Brexit. The Leader of the Opposition is letting the Government off the hook. He has it within his gift to bring forward a no confidence motion that will test the will of the House but, crucially, it will also allow his party to move on to the issue of a people’s vote. Yesterday’s stunt was an embarrassment. The Scottish National party and others sought to amend his motion, and today I ask him to do what he failed spectacularly to do yesterday and table a motion of no confidence in the Government. Let us move on and have that debate tomorrow.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): The Labour party has made it clear that we will table a motion of no confidence in the Government when we think we have the best opportunity of winning that vote. However, does the right hon. Gentleman agree it is a crying shame that the Prime Minister has chosen always to operate these negotiations in the best interest of the Conservative party? If she had considered the national interest, perhaps we would not be in the current mess.

Ian Blackford: I agree with the hon. Lady on that last point. She knows I have respect for her but, on the basis of the risks we all face, we have a responsibility to come together. I have spoken about the support we have had in working together with the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and Plaid Cymru, and I plead with the Labour party to work with us, too. We have to unite, because it is in the interest of all our nations to do so.

We need to bring forward a motion of no confidence in the Government because of the conditions the Labour party has laid down; we need to see whether we could trigger a general election. We need to test the will of the House on that issue and, on that basis, we would then be in a position to move forward. I simply say to the Leader of the Opposition that, based on the very real risk that there will be no deal as a consequence of the stupidity of what has come from the Government, we now have that responsibility, and today is the day—not tomorrow, and not when we came back in January—when the Opposition must unite in tabling a motion of no confidence in the Government.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will give way one more time.

Geraint Davies: In that spirit of solidarity, will the right hon. Gentleman join the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) in supporting my European Union (Revocation of Notification of Withdrawal) Bill? The Bill would basically rule out any possibility of a no-deal Brexit and would require any deal to be agreed by this House and by a vote of the people, or else we stay in the EU by revoking article 50.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman is to be commended for his actions and, of course, we made it very clear that we supported the amendment of the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), which would have ruled out no deal. We are engaged in a process that we all want to go through, and it is important that the legal action taken by a number of Scottish parliamentarians, on a cross-party basis, has got us to a position where we know we can revoke article 50. Indeed, that may be what has to happen, but we have to get to a situation where the House is given an opportunity to vote for a people’s vote first. In that scenario, the revocation of article 50 may well have to happen.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for knowing parliamentary procedure and for calling for the motion to be tabled correctly. I have been calling for the Labour party to grow up and table the motion with which it keeps threatening us. I take the right hon. Gentleman back to the people’s vote, about which I have a sincere question. He is unhappy with the outcome of the Scottish independence referendum and with the outcome of the 2016 referendum. Why would he accept the outcome of a people’s vote any more than he has accepted the other two?
Ian Blackford: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, because it allows me to say that, when we had our referendum in 2014, we produced an 800-odd page White Paper. The people of Scotland knew exactly what our vision was for an independent Scotland. Crucially, in 2016 we had a slogan on the side of a bus. We had a ridiculous situation in which people were not told the truth about what the impact of Brexit would be.

Way back in 2014, the people of Scotland were told that, if we stayed in the United Kingdom, Scotland would remain a member of the European Union and our rights as European citizens would be respected. In the 2016 referendum the people of Scotland voted to remain by 62%, and we were told that if we stayed in the United Kingdom, we would lead the UK and we would be respected as a partner in the United Kingdom.

What do we find? We do not find that we are leading the UK; we find that the UK is taking us out of the European Union against our will. The Scottish National party will not sit back and allow the people of Scotland to be dragged out of the European Union against their will. Scotland is a European nation, and we will remain a European nation.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and painting a very bleak picture of the mess the UK is getting itself into. Under normal circumstances, the Prime Minister would be long gone by now. Given that no one else wants the job, not even the flip-flopping, Brexit-enabling Leader of the Opposition, does my right hon. Friend agree that Scotland’s future lies squarely as an independent country and an equal partner within the European Union?

Ian Blackford: Of course, the First Minister of Scotland has said that we will work constructively across parties to try to save the UK from Brexit. We have made it clear that we wish to stay in the European Union but, when we get to the end of the process, if there is an economic threat to jobs and prosperity in Scotland, among other things, it is clear that the Scottish Parliament has a mandate to call an independence referendum. There is a majority in the Scottish Parliament to hold such a referendum.

Just a few months ago, this House voted to accept the claim of right for Scotland. If the Scottish Parliament comes forward with a request for a section 30 authority, this House must allow the people of Scotland to determine their own future.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I want to make progress. I will take interventions later.

Here we have a Parliament in London that is silenced by the Government, and the devolved Administrations are silenced and ignored. The magnitude and seriousness of the challenge before us cannot be overestimated. The House will go into recess this week, and we cannot allow this farce to continue over the Christmas period. The Prime Minister has returned from Brussels with nothing. She has been humiliated, told by the European Union that there is no new negotiation, yet she continues to bury her head in the sand, hoping that the squeeze of time—the threat and the pressure of no deal—will get her blindfold Brexit over the line. It will not. This Government should hold the meaningful vote now. They should put the options on the table now or stand aside and let the people decide.

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I very much agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s proposal for the vote coming back immediately. Of course, the various options open to us could then be voted on in a meaningful way. In that event, would he and his party vote for Norway-plus? I know he has argued for that, as indeed have I, and it would mean the single market and the customs union. Or does he take the view that that boat has set sail?

Ian Blackford: The right hon. Lady makes a useful intervention. The position of the Scottish National party has always been that the people of Scotland voted to remain, and we wish that to be respected. The people’s vote would create a circumstance in which we could at least test the will of the people of the United Kingdom. We have sought to compromise over the past two and a half years, and she is correct that we said Norway-plus is the minimum we would accept, but I believe that ship has now sailed. We ought to be staying in the European Union. That is the best option, and we should put it to the people. I am grateful that she also takes that view.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I need to make progress. I am aware that many other Members wish to speak, and I wish to move on.

Yesterday the Prime Minister told us that we will get our meaningful vote but that we will get it in the second week of January. That is not acceptable. Do this Government recognise that, with every week that passes, more and more uncertainty sets in? We hear day after day of companies putting off investment decisions, and it is the uncertainty and chaos of this Government that is leading to that. Businesses, farmers and workers are all left waiting on this Government. Delaying the vote is a total abdication of responsibility, causing even greater uncertainty and instability. Yet again, the fate of our services and our economy is left to play second fiddle to the internal struggles of the Tory Party. The truth is that this Prime Minister is hamstrung by her own party. The result of the recent confidence vote was little more than a pyrrhic victory for the Prime Minister. At a crucial time in its history, the UK has a lame-duck Prime Minister, saddled with a lame-duck Brexit deal. The Prime Minister cannot and must not use this result to support her claim that the choice is now between her bad Brexit and a catastrophic no-deal Brexit. The Prime Minister will have to face up to the fact that her deal carries no majority in the House of Commons. She must break the deadlock, and the SNP will support any second EU referendum that has remain as an option. Still struggling to cobble together support for her disastrous deal, the Prime Minister is seeking to run down the clock rather than act in all our national interests. We, as parliamentarians, cannot let that happen. We must ensure that the voices of our citizens are heard.

The Prime Minister’s deal must be defeated. No one with the interests of this and future generations at heart could possibly accept it. This deal will take Scotland
out of the EU against our will and remove us from the European single market of 500 million people. It will take us out of the customs union and the benefits of EU trade deals with more than 40 countries across the globe. This deal will make us poorer than staying in the European Union. [Interruption.] I can see the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), shaking his head, but he should look at his own economic analysis, as every shred of evidence shows that we are going to be poorer with Brexit than we would be if we stayed in. If he has not even read it and if he does not understand what it is in it, heaven help us. A no-deal Brexit is going to cost each person in Scotland £1,600 by 2030, compared with continued EU membership.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is on the subject of economic analysis, so let me draw his attention to page 63 of the economic analysis supplied by the Government, which clearly shows that under the Prime Minister’s deal there is zero impact on economic growth for Scotland. Surely if he wants to stand up for Scotland, he would do it by backing this deal.

Ian Blackford: I am afraid to say that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken, because the analysis he is referring to looks at the Chequers proposal and does not look at the Government’s deal. He is wholly wrong and he needs to go back to school and do his homework.

The Government’s Brexit deal will damage our NHS in Scotland, and make it harder to attract and retain the social care and health service staff we need. It will sell out our fishermen and put us at a competitive disadvantage with Northern Ireland—and the Prime Minister knows it. That is why our voice must be heard; this House should vote this week before the recess.

Ian Blackford: I am most grateful for that. Obviously, I have taken a number of interventions and I may take one or two more, but I am conscious that many people wish to speak in this debate. I have a number of remarks I wish to make—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Very good.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, that is why our voice must be heard. This House should vote this week before the recess.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Is my right hon. Friend aware that during last night’s Fisheries Bill Committee sitting an amendment proposed setting an end date of 31 December 2020 for leaving the European Union, stop wasting time on their deal, which is going to be rejected, and pursue a better way forward. The SNP is clear that that means there should be an extension to the article 50 process, and we will join those from other parties in trying to secure such an extension.

We have always argued that the best option is to retain EU membership. We support a second EU referendum. Failing that—the best option of continued EU membership—we must stay in the single market and the customs union. I repeat that there are options that this Government are ducking and diving. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I would like to hear the right hon. Gentleman, even if nobody else does. I want to hear what he is saying, and he will be treated with the courtesy due to the leader of a party in this place.

Ian Blackford: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am most grateful for that. Obviously, I have taken a number of interventions and I may take one or two more, but I am conscious that many people wish to speak in this debate. I have a number of remarks I wish to make—

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will give way in a little while.

The recent European Court of Justice judgment provides clarity at an essential point in the UK’s decision making over its future relationship with the EU. It exposes as false the idea that the only choice is between a bad deal negotiated by the Government or the disaster of no deal; remaining in the EU is still on the table, and the Prime Minister cannot insinuate otherwise. We, as Opposition parties, cannot allow the Government to kick the can down the road and we cannot allow them to run down the clock. I repeat: this is not a binary choice of this deal or no deal—there are other ways forward. The Prime Minister is simply scaremongering, trying to prevent a second EU referendum. This Government claim to want to fulfil the will of the people, yet they deny the people of the United Kingdom a say. This is a democracy, not a dictatorship. After two years of chaos, people have the right to change their minds. Why would this Government deny them a say? We cannot go on like this. We need clarity, certainty and conclusion; this continued turbulence is sending our economy into further insecurity. At a time when this place should be doing more to end homelessness, to decrease worklessness, to stop universal credit hardship, to safeguard our NHS—I could go on—this Prime Minister and this Government are distracted and divided. It is time they got on with the day job.

Mr Cunningham: I picked up a point the right hon. Gentleman made earlier in response to Government Members. Scotland faces the same as the rest of the country. Under this deal there is a lot of uncertainty and unknowns. The EU can almost tell us what to do. We cannot go on like this. We need clarity, certainty and conclusion; this continued turbulence is sending our economy into further insecurity. At a time when this place should be doing more to end homelessness, to decrease worklessness, to stop universal credit hardship, to safeguard our NHS—I could go on—this Prime Minister and this Government are distracted and divided. It is time they got on with the day job.

Ian Blackford: I am not surprised, because the Conservatives have form: when Ted Heath took us into the European Union, he sold out Scotland’s fishermen and every Tory Administration since have done exactly the same—and, guess what, they are still selling out Scotland’s fishermen.

Running down the clock to threaten a no-deal Brexit is neither acceptable nor realistic. There is no majority in this House for such an outcome. It is crucial that a no-deal Brexit and the Prime Minister’s deal are ruled out now. The Government must start listening to the Scottish Parliament, stop wasting time on their deal,
Ian Blackford: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman that what the Government have put forward is a plan for transition; there is no certainty for the long term. That is why Members from around this House, including Government Members, have to call a halt to this, and we should be doing that this week. We should be doing it on the basis that there is a real threat to the jobs, incomes and security of all our people of a Prime Minister who is recklessly taking us towards a potential no deal. We, as a House, should be putting a stop to it, and that is the opportunity we should be taking this week.

Several hon. Members rose—

Ian Blackford: I am going to make progress, and I am not going to take any more interventions, as I have been generous with my time.

Yesterday, the Prime Minister told us she was planning for a no-deal Brexit. Prime Minister, there cannot be no deal; it must be removed from the table. It would be economically catastrophic. This Government must remove no deal from the table, instead of using it as a gun to hold to MPs heads. We were promised “strong and stable”. The people were promised that we would take back control. This is a party and a Government completely out of control. I look around this Chamber at colleagues and friends, and perhaps some who would call themselves foes, but in common we came here to serve. I came here to serve Scotland—my people and my country. It devastates me to see the will of my people disregarded by this UK Government. It angers me to see my Parliament in Scotland—our Parliament in Scotland—our First Minister and her Cabinet locked out by this Tory Government from decisions that will affect the rights and lives of people right across our country. It is not right, and Members from other parts will feel the same. I know that England and Wales voted to leave, but what about the rest of us who voted to stay? So much for the union of equals that we were promised.

The Scottish National party will work with others to protect all of the UK from Brexit. That is the right thing to do. We will work constructively in the House, but our first priority as the Scottish National party is to stand up for Scotland. It is becoming ever clearer that Scotland is being hampered by its continuance in the United Kingdom. We do not co-exist in a partnership of equals. With every day that passes, the Government are making the case for Scottish independence. The UK Government’s behaviour over the continuity Bill, exposed this week by the UK Supreme Court, shows the utter contempt with which they are treating Scotland. With the UK Government’s approach to Brexit in complete and utter chaos, it is no wonder the Scottish Parliament does not trust Westminster to prepare our laws for life after Brexit. Of course, when there was the outrageous power grab of the powers of the Scottish Parliament, not one Scottish Tory MP stood up to defend the rights of our Parliament, for which the people of Scotland voted in 1997. They voted against Scotland’s interests: history repeating itself once again.

We get from the Government empty, meaningless words—that is all we can expect from them—and now those words are not worth the paper they are transcribed on, as promise after promise is broken by the UK Government. It is time we had our say and got our answers. I am sorry he is not present, but let me put it to the Leader of the Opposition again: table a vote of no confidence in this Government. We are with you. It is clear today that the gimmick motion has failed, but I say to the Leader of the Opposition: table the correct motion and do it today. The SNP stands ready to end this farce—to end this shambles. We are ready to defeat this Tory Government and a damaging Brexit. This Tory Government want to put Scottish workers on the dole through Brexit. The question for the Leader of the Opposition is whether he is prepared to stand up—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. That is enough. The right hon. Gentleman is concluding his speech. He will do so and he will be listened to.

Ian Blackford: A failure to table a motion a table a motion of no confidence will be a dereliction of duty. We now need to call time on this Government. The Prime Minister’s time is up. The Government must go. We cannot allow the Conservatives to drive us off the cliff edge. The Leader of the Opposition cannot also seek to run down the clock to buy himself more time. He claims he wants an election; well, if he wants this Government out, he should listen to the other Opposition parties. We will support him in a vote of no confidence. Now is the time for courage. Now is the time for all of us to stand up for our communities. Now is the time for the Prime Minister to stand down, and for this Government to stand aside and let the people decide.

2.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): Notwithstanding the tone of the remarks by the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), or indeed his conclusion asking the Prime Minister to stand down—in opening his remarks he asked the Prime Minister to stand here and reply—and notwithstanding the inherent contradictions at both the start and the end of his speech, I congratulate him on securing the debate. I recognise that this is an important issue and one on which I know, given that the Prime Minister took questions for two and a half hours yesterday, many Members wish to contribute. I shall therefore keep my remarks relatively brief, but I wish to address directly a number of the points raised by the right hon. Gentleman. He opened his speech by saying that there is a binary choice—

Ian Blackford: That’s what you are doing.

Stephen Barclay: I am slightly confused: I am simply quoting back to the right hon. Gentleman how he opened his speech, which he seems to be taking issue with. Members might be forgiven for having slightly lost the train of his argument, but let me remind them—

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP) rose—

Stephen Barclay: I understand why the hon. Lady does not want to hear her leader’s remarks quoted back, so will happily take her intervention.

Carol Monaghan: Does the Secretary of State understand the word “binary”? It means two parts, which means there are two choices. At the moment, the two choices open are deal or no deal. That is binary.
Stephen Barclay: I appreciate the hon. Lady’s pointing out the definition of “binary”. I was coming on to say that I think there is a third choice, and which the Prime Minister has repeatedly alerted the House: the risk of no Brexit at all. My point was that the right hon. Gentleman argued that there was a binary choice, while the substance of his remarks was to argue for a third choice. That seems to be an inherent contradiction in the case that he put forward. Notwithstanding that, he went on in the next section of his speech to talk about honesty. I do not think that the way to demonstrate honesty, particularly to the young electorate of which he spoke, is to say to that electorate, “We will give you a choice and respect that choice,” and then when the electorate deliver that choice to say, “Sorry, we are not actually going to honour that.” To me, that is not the way to approach a debate with honesty.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): The referendum had the second largest turnout of any electoral exercise in the entire history of the United Kingdom, and we know that the result was a margin of 1.4 million, but when I listen to the Scottish nationalists speak it appears to me that not only do they want to say no to that result—the democratic wishes of the people of the United Kingdom—but to ignore completely the fact that more than 1 million Scottish people voted to leave the European Union. Does my right hon. Friend believe that they should have their voices heard as well?

Stephen Barclay: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. It is not just that SNP Members want to say no; they seem to say no to the decision of the electorate but yes to giving them a decision. They gave them a decision on the independence referendum but then said that they did not want to listen to it. There was then the decision on the EU referendum, but they say they do not want to listen to that, either.

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

Stephen Barclay: Of course I will give way to the hon. Lady, but the point is that if one is talking of honesty and listening to the electorate, the starting point is to respect the decisions that the electorate take.

Patricia Gibson: Once again, we have a Tory Front Bencher or Prime Minister coming to the House and talking, because it suits them to talk, about the result of the referendum, but taking no cognisance of the fact that cheating occurred, according to the Electoral Commission, or of the fact that people were lied to about £350 million a week for the NHS. As the Secretary of State wants to talk about honesty, will he face up to the fact that people were lied to, as pointed out by the former Tory Prime Minister John Major?

Stephen Barclay: Far be it from me to keep pointing out contradictions, but the right hon. leader of the SNP has directly and, I am sure, inadvertently misrepresented the position of the two SNP Members of the European Parliament, both of whom are personal friends of mine. I can absolutely assure her that they have made their position clear that they are against this deal. Indeed, one of them was my co-litigant in the article 50 case. I ask your assistance for the third time in a week, Madam Deputy Speaker, about how I can go about correcting misrepresentations of the facts about Scottish politics coming from the Government Benches and the Benches behind them.

Patricia Gibson: The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) has directly and, I am sure, inadvertently misrepresented the position of the two SNP Members of the European Parliament. In the European Parliament, the members of the SNP who sit in that Parliament have voted in support of the principles of this deal time and again. Has the Secretary of State any idea why SNP MEPs support this deal, but SNP MPs appear not to?

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder whether you can help me. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford)—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I must hear the hon. and learned Lady. Joanna Cherry: The hon. Member for Chelmsford has directly and, I am sure, inadvertently misrepresented the position of the two SNP Members of the European Parliament, both of whom are personal friends of mine. I can absolutely assure her that they have made their position clear that they are against this deal. Indeed, one of them was my co-litigant in the article 50 case. I ask your assistance for the third time in a week, Madam Deputy Speaker, about how I can go about correcting misrepresentations of the facts about Scottish politics coming from the Government Benches and the Benches behind them.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I appreciate that the hon. and learned Lady has very cleverly made her point into a point of order by asking my advice. I say to her that, of course, she does not need my advice, as she has just taken the opportunity of her point of order to put her point on the record. It is not for me to judge whether the hon. Lady or the hon. and learned Lady are correct in their interpretation of something that has happened in another Parliament, but I am satisfied that both points of view have been put to the Chamber.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I think you know, I have the greatest of respect for you, but it occurs to me from what you have just said that the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford) can just come here, as she has done, make stuff up and then nothing happens. There has to be consequence for that. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Nobody can come here and “make stuff up” that is not correct, but this is a debating chamber, and there are opinions on both sides of the House. I would be the first to say that, if this is a matter of fact, I am concerned that a matter of fact should be properly represented in this Chamber—[Interruption.]

Vicky Ford: Order—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will allow the hon. Lady a brief “further to that point of order”.

Vicky Ford: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. My understanding is that the SNP MEPs have backed numerous resolutions that set out the principles behind this deal, and have been quoted in the press releases by their group as backing—[Interruption.]
Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. [Interruption.] Order. We will have no more on this subject. The fact is that there are different interpretations of the actions of the SNP. I am satisfied that both sides have been heard, and that the facts are on the record. We will leave aside that point of order and allow the Secretary of State to continue with his speech.

Stephen Barclay: One could be forgiven perhaps for being confused over the SNP’s position on these matters, because no doubt the electorate are also confused. They were told in 2014 that there was a vote to listen to the Scottish people. The Scottish people duly spoke and said that they wanted to be a part of the United Kingdom, and now the position appears to be to no longer listen to the Scottish people and to ignore their views.

Several hon. Members rose—

Stephen Barclay: I shall take two more interventions and then I will make some progress.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way as I was not afforded the courtesy of being able to intervene on the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). As he spoke about the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, he set out to the House how great the White Paper was that the SNP had produced. The SNP no longer stands by its White Paper on Scottish independence. Does that not just show what the SNP is all about? It is not even worth listening to, because what it speaks about, not even it can defend.

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for his intervention. It is perhaps not a surprise that, notwithstanding its 800 pages, one could find the record and still be left confused as to what the SNP’s position is.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. It is good to hear him have at least a few sentences before being interrupted by the SNP. Does he envisage any circumstances in which the Government might revoke article 50—a de facto extension of article 50—in order to give the Government more time to prepare for a World Trade Organisation-terms Brexit, or to prepare for a better deal given by Europe to the United Kingdom? Does he envisage any such circumstances within, perhaps, the next two months?

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend for giving way. Perhaps he can shed some light on the confusion that I feel following the right hon. Gentleman’s speech. He spoke of wanting a second referendum and a people’s vote, but he said that he did not want the deal on it, and he did not want the deal on it. Can we have a referendum with just one question on it, which is to remain?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend points to how one might achieve that unicorn, which is to end the uncertainty over the SNP’s position. Notwithstanding the fact that it is a waste of money to have multiple referendums—that waste of money is obviously acceptable whereas other ways of wasting of money are not—I simply draw the attention of the House to the fact that the best way to avoid incurring the cost of no deal is to back the Prime Minister’s deal.

Alan Brown rose—

Stephen Barclay: I want to make some progress. I have taken a fair number of interventions. I did start by saying that I was very conscious that many Members would want to come in on the debate. The first two speeches have taken quite a bit of time, so I should probably crack on.

The responsible act of a Government is to prepare for the contingency of a no deal, but it is absolutely our priority to secure a deal, and that is what the Prime Minister continues to work day and night to do.

Let me make some progress. As the Prime Minister set out yesterday, we intend to return to the meaningful vote debate in the week commencing 7 January and to hold the vote the following week. As I will set out, that is consistent with our crucial next step of responding to the concerns expressed by MPs on the backstop and I make no bones about accepting, as the Prime Minister has done, that the deal that the Government secured looks at the record, they will see that what I did say was that we are wasting money on no deal that should be invested in frontline services. The Secretary of State has a duty to make sure that he is correct.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Again, I am not the adjudicator of whether what any Member says here is correct as far as other Members are concerned, but it is my duty and my intention to make sure that the facts and the truth are always on the record. I am quite sure that the Secretary of State will deal with that point.

Stephen Barclay: I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for your clarification. I am very happy to stand by that clarification. I thought that the substance of what the right hon. Gentleman was saying—I realise that there was a lot of confusion over his speech—was that he was not in favour of spending money on no deal preparations. I thought that that was the kernel of his point. Perhaps he is in favour of spending money on no deal preparation.

Ian Blackford indicated dissent.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con) rose—

Stephen Barclay: I give way to my hon. Friend with pleasure.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way. Perhaps he can shed some light on the confusion that I feel following the right hon. Gentleman’s speech. He spoke of wanting a second referendum and a people’s vote, but he said that he did not want the deal on it, and he did not want the deal on it. Can we have a referendum with just one question on it, which is to remain?

Stephen Barclay: My hon. Friend points to how one might achieve that unicorn, which is to end the uncertainty over the SNP’s position. Notwithstanding the fact that it is a waste of money to have multiple referendums—that waste of money is obviously acceptable whereas other ways of wasting of money are not—I simply draw the attention of the House to the fact that the best way to avoid incurring the cost of no deal is to back the Prime Minister’s deal.
was not going to win the support of the House without further reassurance, and that is the message that the Prime Minister has been clear about in her meetings and communications with EU leaders.

At last week’s European Council, the Prime Minister faithfully and firmly reflected the concerns of this House over the Northern Ireland backstop.

In response, the EU27 published a series of conclusions, making it clear that it is their “firm determination to work speedily on a subsequent agreement that establishes by 31st December 2020 alternative arrangements, so that the backstop will not need to be triggered.”

The EU27 also gave a new assurance in relation to the future partnership with the UK to make it even less likely that the backstop would ever be needed, by stating that the EU “stands ready to embark on preparations immediately after signature of the Withdrawal Agreement to ensure that negotiations can start as soon as possible after the UK’s withdrawal.”

EU leaders could not have been clearer; they do not want to use this backstop. The conclusions from the European Council go further than the EU has ever done previously in trying to address the concerns of this House. Of course, they sit on top of the commitments that we have already negotiated in relation to the backstop. Let us remember the real choice, which is between the certainty of a deal and the uncertainty of the alternatives.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the best way to provide security for the economy is to agree the deal? We heard a great deal from the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber about jeopardising jobs and people losing jobs. If we agreed the deal and the Prime Minister could get some security over the backstop, it would provide the greatest security for jobs that we could give the whole nation, including the Scottish.

Stephen Barclay: My right hon. Friend speaks with great passion on this issue and she is right about the importance of certainty. First, many businesses particularly value the certainty of the implementation period that is delivered to 2020. Secondly, it was interesting that many people who were critical of the Prime Minister over the joint statement in December 2017, which was a political declaration, were critical on the basis that it was binding. Some of the same critics now criticise the political declaration reached alongside the withdrawal agreement because they argue that it is not binding. There is an inconsistency there.

What is clear, as the Attorney General has set out to the House in a series of statements and questions, is the legal wiring that exists between the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration, giving the framework on which the future economic relationship will be based. That will give us confidence as we move forward into the second phase.

Wera Hobhouse: The Secretary of State has just mentioned the political declaration last December. Clearly what was legally binding was the backstop, about which everybody is now very unhappy because the political declaration is not legally binding. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) is absolutely right that that creates worry and uncertainty. The certainty is the backstop. The Government need to come clean and be honest with everybody—Conservative Members and the public—that the backstop is legally binding.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): At least we’re here!

Stephen Barclay: The hon. Lady is correct that a backstop will be required in any deal that is reached with the European Union, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) commented from a sedentary position, on an issue of such importance to the Lib Dems, it is good that the hon. Lady—unlike any of her Lib Dem colleagues—is actually in the House to make that point with such conviction.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; he is being characteristically generous.

We read that the Cabinet is now stepping up preparations for no deal, and the Government have quite rightly given a commitment to the more than 3 million European citizens here in the UK that their rights will be protected in that eventuality. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what assurance he or his predecessors have received from the other member states about the position of the 1.2 million Brits who may find themselves without rights in those circumstances?

Stephen Barclay: Let me first pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his work through the Exiting the European Union Committee. He will be aware of a number of the public statements that have been made—for example, in respect of the French position on safeguarding the rights of UK nationals in Europe. However, he points to the wider point about the best way to secure the rights of our own nationals in the EU, which is through the deal that the Prime Minister has agreed.

The right hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the written ministerial statement that I tabled about the position of EU citizens in the UK, which this House
has long debated. As a former Health Minister, I am very conscious of the hugely valuable role that EU citizens play in our NHS, as in many other parts of our business and public life. We have made that unilateral declaration, but the right hon. Gentleman is correct that that has not been offered in all the 27 member states. Obviously that is an area of focus for us. A number of statements have been made, but the deal is the best way of securing those rights for UK nationals.

When the Prime Minister entered into this negotiation, she was told that there was a binary choice between two off-the-peg models—what are colloquially known as the Canada option and the Norway option—yet she has secured a bespoke option. From listening to this House, we have heard loud and clear the concern about the backstop element of the deal, notwithstanding the fact that there is no alternative deal that would not bring a backstop. The right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber is an experienced parliamentarian, but he must know that it is not an option for Scotland to remain in the single market when the people of Scotland voted to remain in the United Kingdom, and that United Kingdom is leaving the European Union.

The truth is that there are three deals on offer, including the deal that the Prime Minister has secured and the option of no deal, which is not desirable. It is worth pointing out to the House that although the Government are preparing extensively for the consequence of a no deal, not all the factors that affect a no deal are within the Government’s control, as the situation is affected by what businesses themselves do and what other member states do.

**Alan Brown:** Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Stephen Barclay:** I am conscious of time, so I want to wrap up.

Cabinet members met today to discuss how, as a responsible Government, we are preparing for that possibility, which—like it or not—remains a risk that this House runs if it does not support a deal.

**Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab):** I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way; he is being very generous. He says that he does not seek a no-deal scenario, and I completely take him at his word, but he equally says that a responsible Government are preparing for that possibility. Can he remind the House how big a fall in our GDP there would be if we went down that route? I recall that it is around 10%. That is about £200 billion per annum. Is it responsible to even countenance that? I do not think it is.

**Stephen Barclay:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, the Treasury Committee looked at the economic impact of the various models, and the modelling of a no-deal scenario shows a far worse impact than that of a deal. That is exactly why we are seeking a deal.

Members need to accept that it is not enough for them to be opposed to things when the default position of being opposed to everything means that the risk of no deal increases. Advocating a further referendum is not a realistic option. One reason for that is the interplay with the timing of the European Parliament elections, which act as a significant constraint on the ability to have a second referendum. A second referendum would also be a significant risk to our Union, as it would be the excuse that the SNP and others would use to call for a second Scottish referendum.

This deal will come back to this House in the new year, when we have had time to respond to the concerns expressed to date and hold further discussions with the EU27. There is broad support across the House for much of the deal. It is a good deal, the only deal, and I believe it is the right deal to offer to the country. I hope that Members of this House will look again at the risks to jobs and services of no deal, and the risk to our democracy of not leaving, and will choose to back the deal when it returns to the House.

3.9 pm

**Keir Starmer** (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I thank the SNP for securing this debate and the Speaker’s Office for granting it.

It is obvious that we have reached an impasse. The Prime Minister spent two years negotiating a deal that she now knows cannot command the support of this House. I am not trying to make a point against the Secretary of State, but I think he acknowledged just a moment ago that he accepts that the deal currently before the House is not going to get the support of the House. That is therefore the position of the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State.

But rather than confront that reality, the Prime Minister refuses to put her deal forward for a vote this week, instead kicking it into the new year. The problem for the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State is that it is accepted that this deal cannot command the support of the House, but abundantly clear from last week’s EU Council that the Government cannot renegotiate the withdrawal agreement. So the one thing the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State know needs to happen for the position to change was rebuffed last week, and, at most, only non-binding “clarifications” could be possible. That is the impasse.

The President of the EU Commission said that there is “no room whatsoever” for renegotiation. The Commission spokesperson said:

“The European Council has given the clarifications that were possible at this stage, so no further meetings with the United Kingdom are foreseen.”

I do not suppose that informal meetings cannot go on, but there will be no formal meetings. I think some of us thought that there might just be the chance, coming out of last week’s summit, that there would be a further round, or a few days, of further negotiations by the teams, but that is not going to happen. The EU Council statement made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is “not open for renegotiation”.

However much the Prime Minister or the Secretary of State—for understandable reasons, perhaps—pretend otherwise, that is now the reality that we face, and that is why the vote needs to come back to this House this week. This deal cannot be changed by the Prime Minister, new negotiations are not even taking place, and we have only three months before the 29 March deadline. The Government’s response—to delay, to play for time, and to hope somehow that the deal will look more appetising in the new year—is not going to work. The reality is that the Government are running down the clock, but running down the clock is not governing, and it is
[Keir Starmer]

certainly not governing in the national interest. Observers sometimes say to me that the Prime Minister is resilient, but this is not resilience—it is recklessness.

James Heappey: It might be argued that the Government are not the only part of this House to be kicking the can down the road, and that the right hon. and learned Gentleman may well have been wanting to participate in a different debate today. Is that not happening because his right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition is inept, or invertebrate?

Keir Starmer: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for my caution in taking advice from the Government on when the Opposition should table a motion of no confidence in the Government. Last week, I heard plenty of Conservative Members say, “Bring it on.” In the role that I currently occupy, many people on both sides of the House give me their opinions all the time, and very rarely do two people agree on the way forward.

It is wholly unacceptable to delay the meaningful vote for another month in the knowledge that there is no realistic chance of delivering material changes to this deal. Yesterday, the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan) said in this House that the Prime Minister is “asking the House to accept a deferral for several weeks of the meaningful vote on the draft withdrawal agreement, on the basis that further assurances can be agreed with the European Union, but there is nothing in what she has said today or in what has been reported from the EU Council to suggest that those further assurances are likely to be given.”—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 540.]

That is the problem. That is why, rather than having this debate today, the Government should be putting their deal to the House, because if that deal is defeated, everybody then needs to put the national interest first. We need to confront what the achievable and available options are and decide, as a House, what happens next in a way that protects jobs and the economy.

But what we hear from the Government is the opposite: delay over a meaningful vote, and then the distraction of no deal, hence today’s headlines about £2 billion for no-deal planning. Talking up no deal has always been misguided and, in my view, deeply irresponsible. The Treasury estimates that a no-deal outcome would mean a 9.3% decline in GDP over 15 years. It would see every region of the UK worse off. It would mean no common security arrangements in place, and a hard border in Northern Ireland. It would be catastrophic for the UK. That is why no deal has never truly been a viable option. It is a political hoax, and I think that, deep down, the Government and the Prime Minister know it. I know from personal experience how seriously the Prime Minister takes the security arrangements of the United Kingdom, and to put ourselves in a position where they would be jeopardised is not, I think, something that, deep down, she thinks could possibly be acceptable for this country.

Hilary Benn: My right hon. and learned Friend is making a most forceful case. I agree that the Government understand the risks just as well as we do. Given that, what possible purpose does he think is served by the Government continuing to pretend that they are prepared for the country to go over the edge of a cliff at the end of March? Would it not help, in this crisis we face, if the Government said, “We’re not going to let that happen”? Then the alternatives that we will have to consider if the deal is defeated would become even clearer than they can be for as long as no deal appears to exist as a possibility when every single one of us in this Chamber knows that it cannot happen.

Keir Starmer: What I think is happening—it saddens me to say so—is that the Government are running down the clock in order to put maximum pressure on Members to face what the Government will present as a binary choice between the proposed deal that is before us and no deal. That is the only purpose left in this delay. Yes, it would help a great deal if we could have clarification now that no deal is not a viable option. It would allow us to focus on other options and to take the necessary steps to advance those options in the time that is available. I call on the Secretary of State to give that clarification if he feels able.

If the Government had ever been serious about delivering a no-deal outcome, they would not be panicking like this at the 11th hour—they would already have had extra staff trained and resources in place. They would already have had the vast infrastructure that would be needed at UK borders and ports.

It is all very well those on the Government Front Bench shaking their heads—[Interruption.] If they will just listen, I will quote their own Chancellor, who said two weeks ago in response to a question from the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) that “if we were to end up having a WTO-type trading arrangement with the European Union”,

that “would involve some very significant infrastructure works that could not be done in a matter of months; they would take years to complete.”

If I was making that point, people might say, “Well, that’s just the Opposition,” but that is the Chancellor’s assessment. When the Chancellor says that, what is the answer from the Prime Minister or those on the Front Bench? What is the answer from the Government?

In a report in October, the National Audit Office said:

“The government does not have enough time to put in place all of the infrastructure, systems and people required for fully effective border operations on day one”,

and that

“organised criminals and others are likely to be quick to exploit any perceived weaknesses or gaps in the enforcement regime. This, combined with the UK’s potential loss of access to EU security, law enforcement and criminal justice tools, could create security weaknesses”.

The NAO has also said—this is a serious point that I have raised a number of times but not heard an answer from the Government on:

“...if customs declarations are required for trade between the UK and the existing EU. HMRC estimates that the total number of customs declarations could increase by around 360%, from the 55 million currently made on non-EU trade to 255 million.”

That is an increase in customs declarations from 55 million to 255 million three months from today, in a no-deal Brexit. What is the answer to that?
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart): Support the deal!

Keir Starmer: The cries to support the deal would have a lot more authority if those on the Government Benches were supporting the deal. The Government are utterly split on this. Last Wednesday's no-confidence vote exposed the fracture, and there is no point pretending it is not there.

Over the summer, the previous Brexit Secretary published 106 technical notices setting out the Government's case for preparing for no deal. They did not get a huge amount of attention at the time, but it is worth reading and re-reading them, as my team and I have done, and as the Institute for Government has done. Those technical notices make it clear that the Government's managed no deal would require the creation or expansion of 15 quangos, further legislation in 51 areas, the negotiation of 40 new international agreements with either the EU or other countries and the introduction of 55 new systems and processes. That is the analysis of the 106 technical notices—the Government's own assessment.

The case I am making is that the argument that there should or could be no deal on 29 March is completely lacking in any viability whatsoever. The very idea that there could be legislation in 51 areas, 40 new international agreements, 15 new quangos and 55 new systems and processes in the next three months only has to be spelled out. That is not my assessment; it is the Government's own assessment. It is not credible to pretend that that can be done by 29 March.

Anna Soubry: I have a great deal of respect for the right hon. and learned Gentleman, but not for the Opposition in this respect. He makes a good point—so are the Opposition now going to do their job of being Opposition in this respect. He makes a good point—so bring forward the vote. Let this House vote, then let us to happen. The Government need to get a grip and agreed by the House. It is obvious that that is not going on it.

Legislation will be put before the House—at least in the chance to approve those measures and when no-deal that money will be spent, whether Parliament will have. That is throwing good money after bad. I hope the passed by a Government who can no longer pass legislation, for not laying the motion last week so that she could get proceed with a no-confidence motion. If I am wrong, I Government to give the Opposition advice on how to do this. I ha ve a great deal of respect for the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). The Government have made a grave error in taking this matter away from Parliament, delaying it for what will be at least a month and then undertaking to bring it back for the inevitable conclusion that would have been reached had the vote occurred the week before last—or was it last week? It seems in all of this as though time disappears, but it has been a grave mistake.

I agree with both the right hon. Gentleman and the right hon. and learned Gentleman said when they talk about the clock ticking away. I am afraid I have to say that I think the Government are playing the ultimate game of brinkmanship—it is deeply irresponsible—with Conservative Members, who are divided, as everybody knows. Unfortunately, the Government are flagging up to those who fear no deal as ultimately the worst thing that could happen, as they should do, that it is in some way acceptable, and they have never taken it off the table as we should have done two and a half years ago.

Of course, the Government are forgetting that we have no mandate: there is no mandate in this country for a hard Brexit. Everybody seems to forget that when we went to the polls in June 2017, the Conservative party lost its majority. We were saved, if I may say so, only by our brilliant Scottish Conservative MPs. However, we lost well over 30 Members from these Benches—hon. party lost its majority. We were saved, if I may say so, of what he said. I also agree with the analysis and with much of what was said by the right hon. and learned Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). The Government have made a grave error in taking this matter away from Parliament, delaying it for what will be at least a month and then undertaking to bring it back for the inevitable conclusion that would have been reached had the vote occurred the week before last—or was it last week? It seems in all of this as though time disappears, but it has been a grave mistake.

I agree with both the right hon. Gentleman and the right hon. and learned Gentleman said when they talk about the clock ticking away. I am afraid I have to say that I think the Government are playing the ultimate game of brinkmanship—it is deeply irresponsible—with Conservative Members, who are divided, as everybody knows. Unfortunately, the Government are flagging up to those who fear no deal as ultimately the worst thing that could happen, as they should do, that it is in some way acceptable, and they have never taken it off the table as we should have done two and a half years ago.

Of course, the Government are forgetting that we have no mandate: there is no mandate in this country for a hard Brexit. Everybody seems to forget that when we went to the polls in June 2017, the Conservative party lost its majority. We were saved, if I may say so, only by our brilliant Scottish Conservative MPs. However, we lost well over 30 Members from these Benches—hon. Friends—and we in effect lost that election. We lost our majority, and it was clear that the people of this country did not support a hard Brexit. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister should have taken it off the table then. Indeed, she must take it off the table now, because it is worst possible outcome.

I say with great respect to my hon. Friends that, in the game of brinkmanship being played, those who share the conclusion that a hard Brexit is the worst possible outcome are being told—we have heard this in calls from the Front Bench, and in some of the chanting and comments from hon. Friends sitting along the Back Benches—“Well, if you don’t want a hard Brexit, you’ve got to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal”, as if there is
no alternative. Indeed, there is an alternative. [Interruption.] Yes, there is, I gently say to the Government Whip sitting on the Front Bench.

Given the growing success of the people’s vote movement, those who want a hard Brexit are being told, “Ooh, if you don’t vote for the Prime Minister’s deal, you might get that dreadful thing called a second referendum, in which the people, knowing what Brexit now looks like, will have the opportunity to have a final say on it.”

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that it is rather extraordinary, at a time when we say we wish to reflect what is sometimes described as the will of the people, that we seem intent on dragging the country out of the EU on the basis of an agreement that appears largely to be rejected by the electorate themselves as flawed?

Anna Soubry: Here is a surprise: of course I agree with my right hon. and learned Friend. I think we will also agree on this: Members on the Conservative Benches who think that we have somehow always wanted to be in the position we are in today of supporting a second referendum are absolutely wrong. Many of us—in fact, all of us—voted for triggering article 50 with a firm determination to be absolutely true to the referendum result. We sought to make compromises, and to reach out and form consensus. That is why it is so interesting—this is a fact—that Scottish National party Members, for example, would have voted for the single market and the customs union, as would many right hon. and hon. Members on the Opposition Benches; I know that Plaid Cymru Members, the Green MP, and so on and so forth would have done. There was a majority in this place for what is now called Norway plus, but that time passed; too many people who said in private that they supported it did not show the courage when it was needed, for reasons that I understand. That ship has now long set sail, but there are alternatives, and there are things that must now occur.

Many of us reached the conclusion that going back to the people was the only right and proper thing to do, for a number of reasons. It has become increasingly clear that many people have changed their minds. It is two and a half years on from the referendum. People now understand far more—this includes hon. and right hon. Members in this place—about what Brexit means and what it looks like. Many have discovered the huge benefits that our membership of the European Union conveys to our country—we have the best, and indeed a unique, deal. Those are many of the reasons why we now support and ask for a people’s vote.

We also look at the 2 million young people who were denied a vote in 2016 by virtue of their age and who now demand a stake and a say in their future because they will bear the brunt if we get this wrong. I gently say to colleagues that if we leave without that vote and it turns out that the people of this country would have voted to remain in the European Union had they been given a vote, they will never forgive us; they will have no faith left in politics, but they will never forgive the Conservative party, and we will take all the consequences.

We need to get this matter back before us. We need to have on the table, with meaningful votes, all the alternatives that are available to us. If we cannot settle on one, we have to look at the process, and that must be a people’s vote or a general election. What is the best? What do the people want? A people’s vote.

3.31 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry). I congratulate my party leader, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), on securing this important debate.

The Prime Minister has yet again returned from Brussels with no progress made in stopping her disastrous Brexit plan. She is clinging to the life raft from her sinking ship while her Cabinet plot against her. The Cabinet Office Secretary is having meetings with Opposition MPs to try to find consensus. The Foreign Secretary has said publicly that it will not be possible to get a version of the Prime Minister’s deal passed in this place. The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions urges the Prime Minister’s Government to try something different because she thinks Parliament is currently headed towards no compromise, no agreement and no deal. The EU is not shifting and has said that the withdrawal agreement is not up for renegotiation.

The Prime Minister is impervious to all of this and is continuing to push her deal on this Parliament and the UK, despite the fact that she knows it will not be voted through. She is ignoring the effect of her actions: sterling is plunging, as are stock prices and growth, but that does not seem to register with her. The Prime Minister’s Brexit uncertainty is a nightmare for our constituents and local businesses.

I represent a constituency that voted decisively to remain. Businesses want certainty, but they face the prospect of a Government going into emergency planning mode, and they have been given no direction from the Government. Small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of our economy, and they will face an especially difficult time. In the Budget, the SNP called for an office to be set up to support all SMEs in navigating new customs arrangements. The UK Government have done almost nothing to clarify the business environment for SMEs and are not helping them to plan for the worst, despite their commitment to do so.

The Prime Minister has stood at the Dispatch Box repeatedly to defend her indefensible deal. She has pulled the meaningful vote until 14 January, in the vain hope that she can wear down those who oppose it. All options, other than staying in the EU, will be damaging, and the UK public certainly did not vote for an outcome that is bad for the economy and their families.

We in Parliament must be allowed to come together before 14 January to defeat the deal and to move forward. There is no majority for anything except defeating the Prime Minister’s deal. We need to acknowledge that Westminster’s two-party system is broken and Parliament is now a place of factions, not parties. There should be a people’s vote. Things have changed in the past two years: there are serious doubts about the conduct of the referendum, there was no clarity about the consequences of leaving the EU and there is serious doubt about the legality of funding. People have a much clearer idea of the consequences of leaving the EU and they should be allowed to vote with that much clearer understanding.
Her Majesty’s Opposition have tabled a motion of no confidence in the Prime Minister, a symbolic action only. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford), along with the leaders of the Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Green party, has tabled an amendment, which calls for a vote of no confidence in the UK Government, to Labour’s vote of no confidence. I call on the Labour party to move us all forward on a vote of no confidence in the Government.

In July 2016, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and said:

“We are living through an important moment in our country’s history. Following the referendum, we face a time of great national change.”

We now also face a time of great national uncertainty.

3.36 pm

**Justine Greening** (Putney) (Con): As I speak today, we are just over 100 days from Britain leaving the European Union. There is no plan being debated in this House, no vote in this House and no plan B. Instead what we see, depressingly for many people outside this place, is just party politics. Last week, we had the spectacle of a potential Tory leadership campaign, which I voted against. This week, we have the shambolic Opposition attempt to try to decide whether they have the confidence to bring a no confidence vote. I think people have a sense of drift in Parliament at the very moment when they want decisions to be taken that can help to get our country back on track as the clock ticks down towards Brexit.

People also recognise that, as has been the case for the past two and a half years, we are not discussing anything else. The issues they face in their day-to-day lives are going missing in this Chamber. The challenges my constituents face—South West Trains, housing, tax credits, universal credit and so on—are not being discussed in this Chamber with the level of intensity that the British people need if we are to play our role as a Parliament scrutinising the performance of Government. We have to get back on to the domestic agenda. Until we solve Brexit, we will not begin to get on to solving the challenges that people face in their day-to-day lives.

**Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): I strongly respect my right hon. Friend, but if there were to be a second referendum and remain were to narrowly win, does she seriously think that that would draw a line under the European issue? Is it not far more likely that it would rumble on—and rumble on for a generation?

**Justine Greening**: We have to accept that this country will always debate its relationship with the European Union and our neighbouring countries on the continent of which we are a part. We are a part of the continent, but we are an island just off the mainland of that continent. It is almost an inevitability that we will continue to debate how close our relationship should be with our European neighbours. We should accept that as normal, instead of obsessing about it as a Parliament and as a country when there are so many other, more pressing issues in the 21st century that we now need to get on with.

**Anna Soubry**: Is it not also the case that, because the political declaration is so vague—so vague it cannot even be properly examined by Treasury officials—all this will carry on rumbling away? There will be big rows, because we still have not determined our final relationship with the European Union.

**Justine Greening**: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. I was in Cabinet when we discussed the need for a transition period—but transitioning to something, not to nothing. Had the discussion then been that we were about to agree to do the political equivalent of jumping out of a plane without a parachute, the conversation would have been very different. That underwrites why the House is so unlikely to agree not only the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement, which has its issues of rules without say for an unspecified time, but the political declaration, which is just 26 pages long, yet is meant to cover the detail of our future relationship with our other European neighbours and the European Union.

What we do not need is for Parliament to keep going round in circles; nor do we need delay. We need some certainty for businesses and people in our country, and that means that we need to do three things as a matter of urgency.

Parliament must have a vote on the Prime Minister’s proposal and the deal. We cannot simply have the debate delayed and procrastination. We need a debate and a vote on the Prime Minister’s deal. After that falls, as I expect it will, we then need to get on to debating and voting on the other options that other Members of the House have brought forward. Whether that is Norway plus Canada, we have to look at those as a Parliament, debate them and decide whether there is a majority in the House for them. I do not believe that there will be. I think that that has been clear since the summer and that we have wasted months, still without reaching a conclusion on the fact that there is gridlock in the House. We will therefore have to have a vote of the people. I cannot see the rationale for a general election. It is self-serving of the Opposition to try to get one. Brexit is not about party politics; it is above party politics. That is why the only people’s vote that we can have on Brexit is a referendum. We also have to recognise that if there is no consensus that we can find in Parliament, we have to trust people in our country to be able to find that consensus for themselves.

I finish by saying that there is no excuse in this House from this Government for any further delay. We have spent two and a half years going round in circles, and we cannot simply go nowhere. We now have to take some decisions about going somewhere. We cannot have this continued dance from the Opposition about what their proposal is for Britain. Most people have realised that there is no proposal from the Opposition and that they face the same challenges as the Government in trying to square the circle of how to deliver a Brexit that is actually the Brexit that millions of leave voters voted for.

Similarly, and perhaps most importantly, I say to Government: do not delay the meaningful vote until the new year. MPs in this place would be happy to delay recess. Frankly, I would be happy to sit through Christmas and into the new year if it meant that we could find a direction on Brexit for businesses and people, who want certainty about where this country is going. There is nothing more important for this House to debate right now, and we have to find a route through. If the Government do not want that, they surely have to bring the House back on 3 January, when bank holidays in
this country have been had, so that people going to work know that their Parliament is going back to work too to find a direction for this country. We have to do this sooner rather than later. People simply will not understand why this place is packing up and having a two-week holiday when we face the biggest constitutional crisis that this country has had in decades. It is simply wrong. The Government have to recognise that and they now need to take some decisions, take some action and make sure that this House has a chance to represent our communities on their deal, to vote it down and to work out where we go next.

3.44 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening). On her challenge, on the Order Paper today I have tabled the European Union (Revocation of Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, because I think that there is consensus in the House that we do not want a no-deal Brexit and the chaos that would bring, including the lack of medicines, the lack of food, and economic catastrophe.

What the Bill says, in essence, is that a deal should be voted on here; if it is agreed to, it should subsequently be voted on by the people; if they agree to it, we should go merrily along that Brexit route; but if it is not agreed to, we should remain in the EU, which would mean the revocation of article 50. That is what people expect of this place. They do not expect some sort of chaos. I accept that the Prime Minister has done her best in a difficult situation, going to the EU to negotiate and trying to bring together two irreconcilable models, the pure Brexiteer and the pure remainder, but it is obvious that the Government, and the whole country, are split.

The Secretary of State has said, “We have already had a vote; we cannot have another.” The simple fact is that if the Secretary of State went to a restaurant and ordered a steak and a bit of chewed-up bacon arrived, he would have the right to send it back. The waiter would not have the right to say, “You ordered some food—eat it.” People were promised more money, more trade, more jobs, and “taking back control”, including control of migration. All that sounded great, and I can imagine a lot of sensible people voting for it, but what has been served up is a situation in which there is not more money. There is the £40 billion divorce bill, and there is the reduction in the size of the economy. We do not have more control. The Ministers have taken the control so that they can reduce environmental protections or workers’ rights below EU minimum standards in the future. We will still, in the deal, have to abide by the rules laid down by Europe, so we have not taken back control at all.

Alex Chalk: As I understand it, the Opposition’s position is that there is no chance of the deal being improved and therefore the Government should have the vote now, but if that is the case, there is even less chance of Labour’s alternative deal being approved. That means that with every passing day, the inexorable logic is that Labour is becoming an accessory to no deal. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree?

Geraint Davies: My own view is that Brexit is a betrayal of conservatism, because we are withdrawing from the most well-constructed market in the world. It obviously denies the Union, because any Brexit will mean an open border with open migration and products moving freely. Ultimately, that will not work. If we have a hard Brexit, there will be a hard border. I also think that Brexit is a betrayal of socialism, because it will mean a smaller cake that we will want to divide more equally, and it will leave a future Tory Government to undermine EU standards and workers’ rights and the environment in the future.

I make no apology for the fact that I am against Brexit and always was. I want a people’s vote because people’s eyes have now opened to the fact that this is an absolute nightmare. They voted for the steak, they got the bacon, and they do not want it. They want to stay with what they had before.

Furthermore, the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 itself empowers the Prime Minister to trigger article 50 on the basis of an advisory referendum. What we have found, and what the courts have found, is that the illegality in the leave campaign would be sufficient for a general election to be ruled void and for the Government to go back to the drawing board. I think that they need, legally, to think again about article 50, and if a deal cannot be agreed, they should withdraw it.

People talk about what will happen if there is another vote. Incidentally, this will not be another vote; it will be a vote on the deal, which is intrinsically different from a vote in principle on whether people want to stay in the European Union. I accept that people wanted to leave on the basis of what they were told, but now that they have seen what has turned up—the bacon—they do not want to eat it, and they should have the right to send it back. That would not be the same as just having another referendum. As Keynes said, “When the facts change, I change my mind.” People say, “What if we had another vote and lost?” We have already lost. Britain will lose if we Brexit.

People say that there will be a lot of anger. Obviously there will be some anger, but people who have been made poorer and poorer by a Conservative Government since 2010 were told, “If you vote for Brexit, we will get rid of the foreigners, and you will have a better job and better services.” In fact, they will have less. They will be even poorer. Those people will not be angry; they will be massively enraged.

We are walking slowly along the road to fascism. That is what is happening in this country. We face a choice between being impoverished and isolated—going down a darkened tunnel with no apparent ending—and seeing the future and returning to the sunny uplands. That means joining the EU again, giving the people the choice as to what to do, and creating a better, stronger future for all our children.

We are at a moment in history when we have to choose whether we give the people a vote or not. Our children will either condemn us in the future for condemning them or will thank us for giving them the opportunity to choose their future in a much better world we can all share—a world in which we can defend our shared values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law, rather than be cast aside, be much weaker, and find those values, in an uncertain world, under attack.

3.50 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): It is a delight to be here in Parliament for another three hours of Brexit chat, and it is staggering to think, given when this
all started, that José Mourinho is out of his club before we are out of ours. [Interjection] It gets worse. I was listening carefully to the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies), and I loved his honesty at least when he said that he does not want Brexit and that is why he is supporting the so-called people’s vote.

**Geraint Davies:** I am doing it because 25,000 jobs in Swansea depend on EU exports, and Swansea will be a lot worse off with Brexit.

**Mr Evans:** I admire that honesty, because a lot of people who bang on about this Orwellian concept of a people’s vote as if 2016 had not happened tend not to be as honest about their real motives. Their real motives are that they wish to stop Brexit; they wish to overturn the people’s vote of 2016.

**Lyn Brown** (West Ham) (Lab): The situation is very simple: I do not want my constituents to be poorer than they are at the moment, which is why we are sitting here day after day trying to get the Government to do something about it.

**Mr Evans:** It is wonderful that there is so much honesty here now. One of the Sunday papers said that eight of the nine organisations that are now backing the people’s vote state explicitly on their websites that they are trying to overturn Brexit, so let us not have any pretence about that.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Evans:** I will not give way again, as I have taken my two interventions.

Let us not have any pretence about what is going on. Of course the people have spoken, including a million Scots who voted to leave the EU, and by a margin of 1.4 million the British people decided that they wished to go. I am well aware that I sit in a Parliament packed full of remain Members, and I understand that they are very angry and feel badly let down by the electorate. This really does turn things on their head; normally people are let down by their politicians, but in this case the politicians have been badly let down by the people. They were asked for their decision as to whether we should stay in or leave the EU. We had this massive exercise in 2016 when the British people said “We wish to leave,” and the politicians cannot quite get over it—the establishment cannot quite get over it, the BBC cannot quite get over it—and they have tried their level best since that vote to ensure that, one way or another, the decision of the British people is stymied.

There are 285 MPs who voted remain who represent leave areas, so I understand where people are coming from in this Chamber. But when sovereignty passed from this Parliament to the British people and we issued a pamphlet to every household that said that we would carry out their wishes, and when this Parliament itself voted for the referendum, really we do have to respect the wishes of the British people instead of relitigating the referendum campaign of 2016.

Indeed, when we talk about what was written on the side of a bus and how much money was going to go into the national health service, I would have thought that Scottish nationalist Members of Parliament would be more interested in how much of our membership fees that are not now going to be sent to Brussels will be going to Scotland—to public services in Scotland, to the NHS in Scotland—rather than into the pockets of Brussels. Indeed, I am sure that President Juncker is very happy with his pay increase this week, which takes his salary to €32,700 a month; that is how much the President of the European Union is getting—way more in a month than most of my constituents earn in a year. I am delighted that we are coming out of the European Union and saving that money so I can see it being spent in my patch, and the Scottish nationalist Members will see it being spent in their patches as well.

Yes, I believe we got some things wrong at the beginning of the negotiations. The scheduling was completely wrong. It gave the EU negotiators a stick, in the form of the backstop over the Northern Ireland-Irish border, and they have hit us with that stick time and again. We are talking about a backstop that the United Kingdom and the European Union both say they do not want to use. They hope they will not need to use it, and they also say that it is going to be temporary. However, when our Prime Minister went to see President Juncker to raise our concerns about the possibility of our legally being able to be held in the European Union for an eternity if this EU so wishes, or of the backstop being used as leverage in the next round of trade talks between us and the European Union, all of a sudden they dug their heels in. They say that they do not want to use the backstop and that it will be temporary, but they are not prepared to allow us to leave the European Union unilaterally if we believe that they are stalling. That absolutely says it all.

I am delighted that the Prime Minister made it so clear yesterday that there would be no revocation of article 50 and no second referendum. She knows what a second referendum would be all about. I am delighted, too, that the Cabinet has today stepped up its preparations for WTO. As I said yesterday, President Juncker listens to what is said in this place, and he gets a bit of succour from the calls for a second referendum because he believes that if the first vote is overturned we will still be spending our money in the European Union and taking its laws. He gets a bit of succour from that, but he will also hear that we are stepping up plans for WTO, and that should provide some leverage.

We should not get angry with our Prime Minister. Where is the anger at President Juncker digging his heels in? Does he really want to see jobs being threatened in the European Union? We always hear people standing up in this place and talking about safeguarding jobs in Britain, but what about safeguarding jobs in Germany, Spain, Italy and the various other EU countries that want to sell their goods to us? We have a £95 billion deficit with the European Union. We buy £80,000 German cars and £3.5 billion-worth of flowers and plants from Holland, and we will want to carry on doing that.

I shall not be taking part in any of the debates tomorrow, so I just want to wish everybody—including you, Madam Deputy Speaker—a merry Christmas and a happy Brexit in 2019.

3.57 pm

**Hywel Williams** (Arfon) (PC): The Leader of the Opposition and the like-minded Conservative European Research Group say that they have no confidence in the Prime Minister. On these Benches, we have no confidence in the Prime Minister or in her Government, and alas,
at present, we have no confidence in the Leader of the Opposition either. The Prime Minister knows full well that no majority can be manufactured in this place for her deal. Other than that, all she seems to know is how to play for time so that the eventual decision will, she hopes, go her way, but there is so little time left, and however much she pleads, her deal fails to command sufficient support.

Yesterday the Prime Minister conceded to my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) that it was in her power to seek to extend the article 50 period; President Tusk has said as much. Extending article 50 would give the Prime Minister more time to try to find a way out of this Brexit impasse, not through squeezing her friends but by reaching out across this House and across the countries of the UK so as to avoid the no deal that she herself admits would be disastrous for us. Yesterday, she refused to take that course. Could there be a clearer example of putting narrow party considerations before the pressing need to find a solution that will work for all the people of these islands?

Talking of the people outside this place, much has been made of the potential savings that Brexit would bring. We were told that there would be a bonanza, with billions of pounds to spend, apparently on the NHS. In the autumn of 2017, the Treasury earmarked £3 billion for Brexit, with £250 million in its back pocket in case of no deal. Yesterday, in Cabinet a further £2 billion was allocated to no-deal plans. Irrespective of all that, we know that a no-deal Brexit would wipe £5 billion off the Welsh economy, so the people of Wales, and people we know that a no-deal Brexit would wipe £5 billion off the Welsh economy, so the people of Wales, and people

**Hywel Williams:** The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. The Leader of the Opposition has unfortunately painted himself into a corner. As happens so often in politics, particularly when in opposition, there are only bad choices, and he seems to be choosing the worst of them.

To conclude, Plaid Cymru and the other opposition parties have tabled an amendment to Labour’s sham no-confidence motion to turn it into a real motion of no confidence in this shambolic Government. We will continue to work together and with others, wherever they are, to ensure that the people of these islands get the political leadership that they need and deserve.
For me, it is about being clear about the change we want to see. Extraneous issues—matters totally irrelevant to whether the border is kept open in Ireland, as all Members agree—is important—could be used to veto future trading arrangements with the European Union, which would result in our staying in the backstop. None of us would think it is genuinely best endeavours if we ended up sitting in a backstop arrangement because, for example, a future Spanish Government did not think they had enough on Gibraltar or a future French President did not quite like the fishing agreement. The Northern Ireland backstop would not cover the common fisheries policy—I know the Scottish National party’s enthusiasm for staying in the European Union’s common fisheries policy—if we were forced into it.

We must make sure we can be confident that we will move forward and that there is not a return to the hard border of the past in Ireland. None of us wants to see the progress of the past 20 years undone, whatever view we take on Brexit. It is about being clear, which is why I welcome the fact that the Government are getting on with what this House asked them to do. It is bizarre for shadow Ministers to demand the vote now because they want to use it. Having the vote now would have been an argument if they wanted to vote it through, not vote it down. Such a vote would not move us forward.

Rather than playing games with procedural nonsense, it is time for the official Opposition finally to come clean on what their policies actually are. To be fair, the SNP and the Conservative party have, and it is for others to reflect over Christmas that there are choices to be made and it is time to make them, not to play procedural games.

4.6 pm

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) not only on securing this timely and important debate but on his speech and on the way he conducted himself in the face of quite disgusting behaviour, frankly, from Conservative Members.

I thank Mr Speaker for granting the debate. It is fair to say that his leadership in the past few weeks has been in stark contrast to that of the leaders of the Conservative party and the Labour party.

The Prime Minister described people discussing the possibility of a second Brexit referendum as somehow betraying the first vote or as being a direct challenge to democracy. I might be wrong, but I cannot recall another Prime Minister suggesting that giving the people their say on a matter is anti-democratic.

What we are debating today is the real failure to honour that first referendum. This Prime Minister has had the job of delivering on that result, and she has chosen her own path, which looks certain to lead to defeat. It is therefore this Prime Minister who has failed to honour the referendum result, and she has failed because she has been too scared to take on her European Research Group extreme Brexiteers in case they submit letters of no confidence to challenge her leadership.

So unwilling has the Prime Minister been to have her Peel moment with her party that she boxed herself into a corner from which it has been impossible to extricate herself. She could have shown leadership and chosen other paths. As the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) rightly acknowledged, the Scottish Government offered a compromise position that many in her own party think would have been passed by this House last year if it had been supported, and that was to remain in the single market and the customs union—the least-worst option on the table regarding Brexit.

Sadly, Labour’s leadership has been equally lacking. They have done nothing to be the real opposition to this Tory Government. They have taken the tactical decision to take no position, to offer no leadership, to do nothing and to wait to see what happens, which has clearly been in evidence over the last week. They are just as happy as this Government to kick the can down the road.

Labour does not really know what it wants to do with Brexit, and at every turn the Leader of the Opposition has, like the Prime Minister, looked at narrow party political advantage rather than work in the interest of all countries in these isles. It gives me no pleasure to say that, because there are some, such as the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and others in the Labour party, who are doing what they can to shift the Labour leadership. But even in the narrow scope Labour is currently operating within, it has still failed in its objective by missing the opportunity to call a vote of no confidence last week when we asked it to work with us to do so.

I cannot think of a more inept and incompetent combination of Government and official Opposition, and at this time of crisis that is unforgivable. That is what is causing the “irreparable damage to the integrity of our politics”—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 529.—] that the Prime Minister speaks of: an unwillingness of both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition to see beyond the end of their own noses. Rather than work with us last week to call a proper no confidence vote before the Tories held their own, Labour ignored us. The Prime Minister won that Tory vote and Labour lost the initiative. Even when Labour ended up belatedly tabling the no confidence motion last night, in a moment of absolute chaos in the leadership office and the Whips office, it still could not get it right, and it was left to the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Lib Dems and the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) to make it meaningful and not just a poorly executed political stunt. Perhaps those sensible Labour MPs who remain might now look to our amendment, support it and put pressure on their leadership to finally step up to the mark. At this time of political crisis, the public are looking for leadership. The First Minister of Scotland has shown that leadership for the entirety of this Brexit process. Sadly both the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition continue to compete to see who can be the most inept. Is it any wonder that the people of Scotland, in growing numbers, want their chance to choose a different path, one of which leads to Scottish independence?

4.11 pm

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray). I did not come into politics to talk about the European Union. I think I have spoken more about it in the past couple of weeks than I have in the past couple of years. I wish to start by praising the Prime Minister. I am certainly no sycophant, and I suspect she probably did not like the letter I sent her a couple of weeks ago,
but she deserves huge praise and credit for the determination and perseverance she has displayed throughout these negotiations, securing a deal that many said could not be secured. She has won my respect and, I suspect, that of the nation for that tenacity.

My constituency was split on the same lines as the country in the referendum—52:48. I did not get involved in either campaign, because although I decided, on balance, to vote for Brexit, I am a democrat and I said that whatever the result was, I would respect it—I stand by that. The decision I have taken on the Brexit negotiations and the EU withdrawal agreement that was due to come before this House is that it is for every Member of the House to do their due diligence, look at every aspect of anything before us and vote on it accordingly. I see my role as being to review the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and to come to a conclusion.

The deal has considerable merit and, apart from one element, I have little hesitation in offering it my full support. The hesitation comes in relation to the backstop. I have been clear about this in meetings with the Secretary of State, who has been hugely accommodating in listening to my concerns, the Attorney General—on more than one occasion—and the Prime Minister. I entirely understand and respect the Government’s position that the backstop will almost certainly be an uncomfortable position for both the EU and the UK.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): The problem with the deal on the table is that it is neither fish, nor fowl. It satisfies neither the remainers, nor those people who wish to leave the EU, and because of that it falls down.

**Will Quince**: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for that intervention, although I do not agree with him on this point. Inevitably, any negotiation on our exit from the EU was going to be a compromise. Most people are probably like me and are, on balance, one way or the other. Of course there are those who have strongly held views on both sides, remain and leave, but most people wanted a compromise that was mutually beneficial to both the EU and the UK, protecting jobs and businesses in this country—this deal largely does that.

It really is only the backstop that I have an issue with. As I say, I respect and understand the Government’s position. It will most likely be an uncomfortable position if we enter the backstop, and I know that the Prime Minister certainly does not want us to be in that position and that she would use every endeavour to ensure that that does not happen. Were we to end up in the backstop, though, I am concerned that we would potentially be in an irrevocably weak position in respect of our future negotiating stance. The EU withdrawal agreement relates only to our exit from the European Union; we then have to go and negotiate the future trade agreement. I have concerns that, given our position in the backstop, we would not approach those negotiations from a position of power balance: there would be an imbalance.

I respect the Government’s position, though, and very much hope that the Prime Minister is right. Sadly, two weeks ago I tendered my resignation as Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Defence, but the Prime Minister has listened. She listened to the first few days of the debate on the withdrawal agreement and has understood the House’s concerns, particularly in respect of the backstop, and gone back to the European Union—she was at the European Council last week and will continue those conversations—to raise our concerns and to try to seek a legally binding solution to the backstop. It is only right and proper that we give her the time necessary to secure the concessions that we in the House want to see. She not only deserves that but has earned it through her negotiating stance throughout the past two years.

On the motion in particular, I have some concern about how individual parties have conducted themselves. Let me turn first to the Scottish National party, which is at least consistent: it is quite clear that the SNP wants to overturn the 2016 referendum result. We can question whether that is democratic and in our national interest—

**Angus Brendan MacNeil**: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Will Quince**: I will in a moment.

We can question whether overturning the 2016 result is in Scotland’s best interests, but at the very least the SNP is consistent. I am still none the wiser as to what the Labour party’s position on Brexit is. We seem to get a different answer depending on which shadow Secretary of State answers the question.

**Stephen Kerr** (Stirling) (Con): I do not believe the SNP is being consistent, because today it dropped a policy that it had been advocating for some time—namely, Norway plus. The SNP was asked directly about Norway plus and the First Minister and others have advanced the idea of Norway plus, but they have dropped it like a hot brick today. So they are not consistent. The only thing the SNP is consistent on—my hon. Friend is correct—is its obsession with independence and a second independence referendum.

**Will Quince**: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and bow to his knowledge of the political situation in Scotland.

Let me turn back to Labour. We get a different answer depending on which shadow Secretary of State is asked. I thought, perhaps naively, that the Labour party was against outsourcing, but it is absolutely clear that over the course of the past week Labour has outsourced all its opposition to the Scottish National party and is almost not even bothering. The dilly dallying over the confidence motion yesterday—what on earth was going on? The only thing in which we can have confidence is that the Labour party has absolutely no ability to offer effective opposition. Yesterday was like the no-confidence hokey cokey—it was verging on ridiculous. This House desperately needs far less political opportunism and far more honesty. At least we know where the SNP is coming from: it does not want Brexit to happen. What is the Labour party’s position, other than wanting a general election?

Let me conclude, because I am conscious that I have only 30 seconds left. I am entirely pragmatic on this issue. I still want to support the EU withdrawal agreement and I very much hope to. Now that the Prime Minister has entered into these vital renegotiations on the backstop, she deserves our support. We need to send a clear message to the European Union that we stand behind
her in seeking those concessions, particularly on the backstop. We have to stop playing politics with this issue and get behind her. I for one look forward to supporting the Prime Minister when she brings back concessions on the backstop in January.

4.19 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): This country is facing a grave political crisis like of which we have not seen for more than a generation. The undeniable truth is that this is something that the Government have created for themselves. From the word go, they have chosen not to reach out across a divided country to try to build a political consensus on the question of our relationship with the European mainland. They have instead looked inward to the party of government, trying to patch over divisions within the Conservative party.

At least this latest insult by the Executive to the legislature in interrupting our debate on their proposals and denying us a vote on them this year is consistent. The Government have not suspended the process to fundamentally rethink their proposals and to listen to the concerns across this House. Oh, no—they are doing so only with a very narrow agenda, which is to placate the extreme right wing of their own party on its concerns about the Northern Ireland backstop. I have to say that the Northern Ireland backstop is, perhaps, the least offensive of the proposals before the House. Of far greater concern is the fact that, by the Government’s own admission, they will impoverish the people whom we represent and deny people the ability to come and live and work in my country, which threatens its future prosperity.

In fact, the most offensive feature of the backstop is that it serves to underscore the duplicity of the Westminster Government when it comes to dealing with representations from Scotland. The national Parliament in Scotland has argued precisely for differential arrangements post Brexit and been told consistently for the past two years that they would be impossible because they would compromise the integrity of the United Kingdom, only to find them written down in this withdrawal agreement with regard to Northern Ireland. That is an insult, and it is contempt for the people of Scotland.

Let me turn to this question of the second referendum. I want to caution some colleagues who are against the notion about the language that they are using in this debate. It is a fantasy and a fiction to try to claim that, somehow, allowing all the people of this country to vote in a referendum is anti-democratic.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): In the Scottish Parliament today, the Cabinet Secretary for Government Business and Constitutional Relations was asked whether he would respect the result of a second referendum, and he would not answer. I therefore ask the hon. Gentleman: would he respect it?

Tommy Sheppard: I am consistent in respecting the results of every referendum. It is true that 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union, but there are 65 million people in the United Kingdom, and at least 2 million of those 7 million have changed their minds. In a democracy, people have the right to change their mind. For people to oppose a second referendum and try to use an historic mandate, which is increasingly out of date, to suppress the democratic aspiration of the people in the here and now is more akin to authoritarian populism than to a liberal democracy. I urge colleagues not to go down that path in our dialogue.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point, but does he not agree that we have had two referendums on this, so this would be the third referendum in which people have been allowed a say about membership of the EU? We also had a referendum in Northern Ireland on the Good Friday agreement, which resulted in a 71% majority. Should not that referendum result be respected, which it is not in the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement?

Tommy Sheppard: Let me explain it this way: we can never say that people do not have the right to reconsider a proposition in a democracy. On the other hand, we cannot have a referendum every month or every year, so we have to set tests for whether it is legitimate to have a second referendum. I would set three tests. First, the information on which the initial decision was taken needs to have substantially changed or to have been shown to be wrong—I think that test is met. Secondly, a significant number of people have to have changed their minds—enough to create a different result. That test is met. The third test is whether the elected Parliament is incapable or unwilling to discharge the mandate from the referendum. When we get the chance to vote on it, that test, too, will have been met. It is now possible that having a people’s referendum is actually the only way to get out of the current impasse and crisis.

Let me turn to the official Opposition. I am being completely non-sectarian. I do not just want to work with the Labour party in defeating this Government; I am desperate to do so. I am really concerned by what has happened over the last 24 hours. Earlier comments suggested that the m-s-wording of Labour’s no confidence motion to include “the Prime Minister” but not “the Government” is somehow a mistake or an ineptitude. It is not. It is a deliberate attempt not to put the question, so that it now languishes on the Order Paper with the same authority and effect as 1,900 early-day motions that are lying around.

I say to the Labour Front Benchers: you need to do something to dispel a growing concern, which is that Labour Members are not actually taking on the Conservatives because they are not actually disagreeing with their policies at all that much and would be quite content to see them go through. The Labour party needs to lead. It is the biggest Opposition party in this House. It needs to step up and co-ordinate the opposition on the Opposition Benches, but also on the Government Benches, and to defeat these proposals. Please do that and we will be your willing accomplice, if you ask us to be so.

There has been a lot of talk about the fact that Scotland, for the time being, remains part of the United Kingdom. I respect the 2014 referendum result. Scotland does remain part of the United Kingdom, and we have every right to argue in this Parliament for the benefit of our constituents within the United Kingdom, which is why we are desperately engaged in a process of trying to save this country from itself—from the worst act of collective self-harm in history—by stopping this ridiculous process of Brexit. But know this: we will not go down with the ship if it does not change direction. We will use
our right of self-determination as a lifeboat to escape from this catastrophe. And when the time comes, if this process unfurls the way the Government want it to, you will be the greatest champions of Scottish independence, because the people of Scotland will take their opportunity to chart a different course and become a proper European nation at the heart of Europe.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. The hon. Gentleman several times referred to “you”, when he meant hon. Members, not the occupant of the Chair.

I now have to reduce the time limit to four minutes.

4.27 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the impassioned speech of the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard).

We are having an emergency debate on matters that are presumably of great importance and urgency, otherwise it would not be an emergency. Yet, having spoken in the Standing Order No. 24 debate roughly this time last week, one has to conclude that we seem to be having exactly the same discussion today as we had last week. It is therefore rather hard to understand exactly how this is an emergency. I suppose this debate was the insurance policy. One cannot blame SNP Members for seeking it, because I suspect they had their doubts about the ability of the Labour Front Benchers to put forward the motion that we thought we were all going to be debating today.

As I asked the Secretary of State earlier—he blushed and declined to answer—it is not quite clear whether it was the ineptitude or the invertebrateness of the Leader of the Opposition that led to the SNP motion being preferred over the official Opposition’s. But here we are, effectively having exactly the same debate that we had last week—yet more time in which we are chewing over exactly the same issues as we have been for hour after hour over the recent weeks and months.

The Prime Minister and her Ministers have spent hours in this Chamber, taking questions at the Dispatch Box. The debate on the meaningful vote was three days in. I have to admit that I caught sight of the Whips book while I sat near them during those three days, and every single line read, “Disagree”. The mood of the House towards the deal as it stood then was absolutely obvious. Rather than proceeding to a meaningful vote last week when it was clear that the House was against it, we went away and sought something different, and when that was not immediately achieved in last week’s summit, we said, “Okay, we’ll give ourselves the Christmas period to push even harder and see if something different can be achieved.” That seems to me to be a very rational, very sensible approach by a Prime Minister and a Government acting in the national interest.

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman is making some important points. I suggest to him that the fact that Member after Member said that they disagreed with this deal, and that the European Union presidency has made it clear that it will not negotiate on it, means that we need to vote down this deal so that we can all come together to break the impasse. That is the point of this debate.

James Heappey: It is interesting logic to say that by voting down the deal we all somehow come together. As far as I can see, the deal is the best chance that we have—it is a very long shot, I grant you—at least of a majority in this House coming together in some sort of compromise.

If the deal is no longer available, we end up with no plan being offered by the Opposition; an outright—and, in fairness, unequivocal and consistent—opposition to Brexit from the right hon. Gentleman’s party; the Liberal Democrats, who in my constituency seem to say one thing on the doorstep to one household and another to another—

Wera Hobhouse indicated dissent.

James Heappey: I would gladly take an intervention from the hon. Lady if she could confirm today that the Liberal Democrats’ official policy is an end to Brexit and that they would like to work with the Leader of the Opposition in government to bring that about.

Wera Hobhouse: I am happy to intervene. We have always said that our best place is in the European Union and that anybody who wants to work with us on that aim is very welcome.

James Heappey: I think that my constituents in Burnham-on-Sea, Cheddar, Shepton Mallet, Glastonbury, Street and Wells can see unequivocally from what the hon. Lady has just said that the Liberal Democrats are indeed seeking an exit from Brexit and would happily put the Leader of the Opposition into No. 10 to achieve that. That is somewhat at odds with what the Liberal Democrat candidate in my constituency has been telling people. I am grateful to her for clarifying that in the short time that I have available to speak today.

I find that we are having these debates again and again and again. I did not come to Parliament to talk endlessly about Brexit, yet that is what we seem to be doing. I am not going to argue that a second referendum is undemocratic. I absolutely take the point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard)—how can it be undemocratic to keep exercising democracy? However, I see a process that would take at least a year to deliver. If it took us 348 days to take the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill through this House, there is no way that a referendum Bill would take any less time. That means a year of huge uncertainty during which time Brexit would continue to dominate the national conversation, not in any way of trying to find compromise and a solution, but with people reverting back to the binary positions that dominated the original referendum debate.

A second referendum would be a step backwards, not a step forwards. It is not an end in itself. It is not a solution to the problems that we face in this place. It is simply us saying that we are not willing to make the decision ourselves and are putting in place a process whereby others can decide because we have not got the bottle to do so. We know what are the options in front of us, and we have to make the decision. A second referendum is a soft way out that solves nothing and does nothing other than create more parliamentary process and more dominance of the Brexit debate.

We have three choices: either no Brexit, which, in fairness, many Members in this House want; no deal, which many Members in this House also want; or the
Prime Minister’s deal, which at least means that we find a compromise and do not end up having to choose between two extremes.

4.33 pm

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I will start by trying to perform something of a Christmas miracle by striking a note of consensus for just a moment. I am sure that hon. Members from across the House would want to join me in marking International Migrants Day. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] It was not that painful, then. It is a day for thanking our migrant family members, friends and neighbours for everything they have brought into our lives, and for committing ourselves to ensuring that all who have made this country their home can live full and happy lives, free from anti-migrant prejudice and discrimination.

In that spirit, I thought I would use my speech to take a slightly different tack and suggest how the Prime Minister might just be able to salvage one meaningful thing from ongoing talks with Brussels—something that could bring a bit of peace of mind to the 3 million EU migrant friends and colleagues we have here, as well as the 2 million or so British people living across the EU, and a way to save us from a completely wasted month. If the Prime Minister wants to do something meaningful that I think would have widespread support in the Chamber, she should seek to ring-fence the agreement on citizens’ rights, so that even in the doomsday scenario of no deal on everything else, those rights would be protected. I do not for a minute think that that would be easy, and it might be that it cannot be done, but it is worth a try, because not trying means that all the 3 million have to rely on is a unilateral promise from the UK Government. Not trying also means that the British in Europe risk losing rights unless Governments in the 27 other member states each unilaterally pass legislation to replicate their status before April.

Of course, the Prime Minister says she has already committed to ensuring that EU nationals can remain here in the event of no deal—the Secretary of State and the Chair of the Exiting the European Union Committee referred to that earlier—but there are three problems with leaving it at that. First, it is no help to the British in Europe. Secondly, the Government’s published arrangements for EU nationals in the event of no deal are a watered-down version of the citizens’ rights in the withdrawal agreement. Why is that? There is no justification for the difference in treatment. Thirdly, and most fundamentally, a unilateral promise from the Prime Minister can be here today and gone tomorrow. We have seen all sorts of Government promises ripped to shreds in recent weeks.

Even if the Prime Minister sticks to that commitment, it does not bind her successors. Those citizens’ rights can be repealed in the blink of an eye, perhaps even through a change to the immigration rules. Who knows? We could end up with a Government daft enough to commit to reducing EU migration by something like 80%, if recent reports are in the right ballpark. It may be that a target-obsessed Prime Minister decides that the only way to meet that goal is to clamp down further on the family reunion rights of the 3 million.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Hostile environment.

Stuart C. McDonald: Indeed. I sincerely hope that I am wrong, but we can well understand why a unilateral promise from the Prime Minister is not filling the 3 million with the sort of certainty that they would like.

For their sake, and for the sake of UK citizens in the EU, instead of frittering away these three weeks of further discussion in Brussels seeking assurances that will not make one bit of difference, the Prime Minister should use them to seek to ring-fence and guarantee at least the citizens’ rights part of the deal. If she tries and fails, she will not get criticism from me, but if she does not try at all, she most certainly will, and she will also get criticism from the millions of EU and UK citizens living abroad who demand this peace of mind.

4.37 pm

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): I want to begin on the theme of leadership and say how proud I was to stand as a Scottish Conservative and be elected to this Parliament under the leadership of our Prime Minister and Ruth Davidson. For my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, the Union is an enduring principle. For many, support for the Union is perfunctory, but she genuinely believes in the Union. She knows that the strength of this country lies in its unity, and when she speaks of our precious Union, she means it.

The SNP are at it—more political games and more procedural devices, and to what end? To the only end that nationalists have any interest in: the break-up of the United Kingdom. Instead of discussing the substance of things, they obsess over process while nursing grievance. What they should be doing is putting the interests of our country and our constituents ahead of their narrow party political agenda.

The SNP do not accept the result of the 2016 referendum. That is not a novel position for them. They have a problem with accepting any referendum result when they do not win, which is always. They are blatant. They want to overturn the votes of 33 million people. Of course, my constituency voted 67% to remain in the European Union. If my constituents had been the sole electorate voting, we would still be in the European Union, but this was a United Kingdom vote on the United Kingdom’s membership of the European Union, and the voice of the people was clear. The people’s instruction was that we should leave the European Union. Should this House fail to fulfil that instruction, it would be an abrogation of our responsibility as Members of this House to respect democracy and the verdict of the British people.

The people of Stirling elected me to this House on the back of my election commitment to make the best of Brexit: to return powers to our country from Brussels and to grow our economy—the free enterprise economy—which has produced a jobs miracle since 2010 and will continue to do so. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is carrying out the will of the electorate. She is acting in good faith and with respect for the instruction of the British people. The people were told their decision would be carried out.

Let us not forget who we are dealing with—the Scottish nationalists. They have only one objective today, which is the objective they always have. They want to break up the United Kingdom at all costs. From the break of dawn on the morning after the EU referendum, Nicola Sturgeon has focused solely on the second
independence referendum. The people of Scotland, who are now bearing the heaviest tax burden in any part of the United Kingdom and living with the failures of an 11-year-old SNP Administration, can see through all the posturing and faux rage. The SNP’s theatrics today may satisfy the appetites of their core supporters, but the people of Stirling want none of it. They want improvements in their schools, their NHS and their police service, and they want policies to tackle antisocial behaviour and to improve the quality of their lives and the life chances of their children, not this pantomime.

4.41 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is always a delight to follow the hon. Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr). I can reveal that his speeches are watched with great excitement in SNP headquarters, where the single question is: how many more phone lines will we have to open for people wanting to join the SNP?

Looking back to April 2017, immediately after article 50 was triggered, we knew that for two years nothing very much would change, but nobody really knew what would happen after that—that depended on the outcome of the negotiations. In December 2018, we know that during a two-year implementation period nothing much is going to change, but nobody has any idea what will happen after that. So after two or two and a half years of the greatest efforts by the brightest buttons in the Tory box, we are no further forward than we were in April 2017. All they have done is bring back and order us—not ask us, but order us—to support a deal, every single aspect of which is immeasurably worse than the deal that we already have and the deal that our nation overwhelmingly voted to retain.

Yesterday, without a hint of irony, the Prime Minister warned about damaging the integrity of our democracy. This from a Prime Minister who broke her promise not to call a snap election and broke her promise to give Parliament a vote last week, and from a party that allowed two self-confessed gross misconduct MPs back in just to let them vote in a leadership contest and a Government who are the first in history to be in contempt of Parliament. If the Government are worried about a loss of trust in the integrity of our politics, I suggest they get themselves a very large mirror and spend some time in front of it. If they want to know about the millions of people who are wondering whether this façade of a democracy is ever going to deliver, they should not only speak to but listen to some of the 62% in Scotland who voted to remain with the deal we already have, or indeed to some of the 71% in Northern Ireland who voted for a peace process that, right now, is not guaranteed under Brexit and which, even if the Prime Minister’s deal is accepted, still will not have a guaranteed long-term future.

The Prime Minister claims to have listened to Parliament. She has listened to Parliament in the way that a defence lawyer listens to the case for the prosecution: absolutely no prospect of her budging an inch from her position, but listening for potential clues as to how she can impose her will on everyone else. Yesterday, she told us that this was not about expressing our personal views, saying that “expressing our personal views is not what we are here to do.”—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 528.]

In response to 23 different Members of Parliament, she then expressed her personal views about what was right and what was wrong. So when the Prime Minister says that we are not here to express our personal views, what she really means is that we are here to listen to her personal views and then do what we are told, regardless of what 649 other Members of Parliament and 60 million other people may think is best. That is not a parliamentary democracy; that is an elected dictatorship. When the word “elected” refers to a Prime Minister without a parliamentary majority, without the confidence of a third of her own MPs, and opposed by nearly 58% of those who voted in 2017, that elected dictatorship becomes dangerously close to an unelected dictatorship.

Had the Prime Minister not run away from debate last week, we would have been discussing the Union for eight hours on Tuesday. The question for Scotland is, which Union? The day is fast approaching when the people of Scotland will be asked whether they want a Union that is a true partnership of equals, such as is enjoyed by our friends in Ireland, or a so-called partnership of equals, which even today has demonstrably treated our nation and our nation’s elected representatives with absolute contempt. When that question is asked, and it will be asked very soon, the answer from the sovereign citizens of Scotland will be as emphatic and as final as it is inevitable.

4.45 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the singular wit of the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant).

Today, we have heard some fantastic words from the SNP; it has all been about humiliation, embarrassment and betrayal. Well, it is not this House that has driven education in Scotland down and has Scotland tumbling down the international rankings; it is not this House that has us failing our young people and their mental health targets; it is not this House that has us losing 150,000 further education college places; and it is not this House that has our farmers being left out of the UK’s Agriculture Bill, betrayed by the SNP. The only betrayal, humiliation and embarrassment is on the SNP Benches, not the Conservative Benches. I wanted to be very clear about that.

We have talked a lot today about uncertainty, and when we talk about uncertainty in this Chamber, it is a real concern. I spoke to a developer in my constituency because a project was behind schedule. I asked why he was struggling, and one of the key reasons he gave, in front of other elected Members who were present, was that the uncertainty posed by indyref2 meant he was unable to get proper funding for the project to progress.

That undermines the SNP’s whole argument about why it cares so much about Unions. I have heard its members talk about the strength of Union, the feeling of camaraderie and the fact that we can achieve so much more together than we can apart. Why is it, then, that they want to remain part of the EU but break our own United Kingdom? It is not rational, it is not logical—it is just plain, hard nationalism. That is divisive; it is the scar that divides our communities.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: The hon. Gentleman complains about the uncertainty over indyref2, as he puts it. The best way to end that uncertainty is to have a referendum and let the Scottish people speak. He is afraid of that.
Luke Graham: As I have shown in every debate, I am never afraid to face the hon. Gentleman. What is clear is that the SNP will not necessarily accept the result of that referendum. They did not accept the result in 2014, they are not accepting the result in 2016, so they certainly will not accept the 2018 result.

I am concerned that the SNP is inadvertently misleading the people of Scotland by telling them that they will be worse off leaving the EU versus leaving the United Kingdom, when we have four times the trade and far more social and cultural connectivity than we do with our European partners.

I will be honest: I campaigned for remain, and I came to this House because I wanted to talk about more Unions, not fewer; I wanted to talk about more international co-operation, not less. The strain that has been seen among my hon. Friends, and that has tested many Labour Members too, relates to the question of how we can progress as a country. We passed the power to the people, and a democratic decision has been made, which needs to be honoured, lest we undermine the democratic mandate we gave the people. I am not in the habit of defying the results of referendums, even though the SNP, as I said, did not respect the 2014 result and do not respect the 2016 result. We must respect the result.

The Prime Minister’s speech—[Interruption.] If Members want to intervene, they should intervene; if not, they should pipe down. When it comes to the Prime Minister’s deal and the economic analysis that goes with it, one of the key reasons why I am minded to support that deal is that the economic impact on the growth for Scotland would be zero—that is on page 63 of the economic analysis that has been issued for everyone to read and observe.

Stephen Kerr: The reality is that the businesses and farmers in my constituency, as in my hon. Friend’s constituency, are saying to us, “Stop playing politics. Get behind the Prime Minister and pass this agreement.”

Luke Graham: This is the point we are getting to: it is just becoming petty party politics. Opposition MPs say, “We want access to the single market.” The deal on the table gives us access to the single market. They say, “We want a customs arrangement.” The deal on the table gives us a customs arrangement. There are some compromises on goods and freedom. I know colleagues in all parts of the House who want a different kind of Brexit disagree with that, but there elements of compromise on all sides. That is why we need to work together. SNP Members make great play of saying that they want to reach across the aisle. I may be just a humble Back Bencher, but as someone who actively campaigned for remain, not one SNP Member has ever approached me to try to work together to come up with a better plan or find some clever new initiative. If they want real co-operation, not less. The strain that has been seen among my hon. Friends, and that has tested many Labour Members too, relates to the question of how we can progress as a country. We passed the power to the people, and a democratic decision has been made, which needs to be honoured, lest we undermine the democratic mandate we gave the people. I am not in the habit of defying the results of referendums, even though the SNP, as I said, did not respect the 2014 result and do not respect the 2016 result. We must respect the result.

The two referendums we have had in the last few years have not brought our country closer together or sealed any rifts; they have actually kept the wounds open and kept them fresh. We have to use this House to bring people together, to come up with ideas and to chart a way forward.

The Prime Minister’s speech—[Interruption.] If Members want to intervene, they should intervene; if not, they should pipe down. When it comes to the Prime Minister’s deal and the economic analysis that goes with it, one of the key reasons why I am minded to support that deal is that the economic impact on the growth for Scotland would be zero—that is on page 63 of the economic analysis that has been issued for everyone to read and observe.

Luke Graham: This is the point we are getting to: it is just becoming petty party politics. Opposition MPs say, “We want access to the single market.” The deal on the table gives us access to the single market. They say, “We want a customs arrangement.” The deal on the table gives us a customs arrangement. There are some compromises on goods and freedom. I know colleagues in all parts of the House who want a different kind of Brexit disagree with that, but there elements of compromise on all sides. That is why we need to work together. SNP Members make great play of saying that they want to reach across the aisle. I may be just a humble Back Bencher, but as someone who actively campaigned for remain, not one SNP Member has ever approached me to try to work together to come up with a better plan or find some clever new initiative. If they want real cross-party working, then they should not use words but take action. That is what our constituents want to see and it is seriously lacking from those on the SNP Benches.

No deal is perfect. The forces facing people in this House are a choice between hard socialism, hard nationalism and a decent compromise from the Government Benches. That is what I am advocating from these Benches. That is what I will be supporting. I hope hon. Members will support me in that, too.

4.51 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Mr Deputy Speaker, how do you follow someone who is speaking in a different debate from everybody else?

This entire process has from the start been one long con job. The EU withdrawal agreement is a complete fudge. The Prime Minister’s visit to Brussels for concessions on the backstop is proof that she, like the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham), lives in a parallel universe. It is absolutely obvious that nothing was gained, and it is obvious that her deal still cannot get through Parliament. It is a damming indictment when an EU diplomat labels the Prime Minister unprofessional and conclusions are changed in frustration at her attitude. It is little wonder that her Ministers are now coming up with alternatives while she has her head in the sand.

The current failures reflect a failed strategy from a Government that she was part of from the outset. The voting franchise was a con. It is an absolute disgrace that EU citizens living here and paying taxes were excluded along with 16 and 17-year-olds. These cohorts would have changed the outcome of the vote and we would not be in the mess we are currently in. Then we had the Vote Leave lies, an organisation whose chair is still a Secretary of State in this Government. We had the Cambridge Analytica scandal and the confirmation of dark money, which the Tories are up to their necks in. The con job goes all the way back to 2014, when the Better Together campaign told Scotland that the only way to retain EU membership was to vote no in that referendum.

The reality is that EU citizens, including my wife in Scotland, are worried about their future, despite any hollow reassurances from the UK Government. I do not want freedom of movement to end, even though that pledge itself is another con trick. Article 5 of the Ireland-Northern Ireland protocol states that within the common travel area there will be “free movement for Union citizens and their family members, irrespective of their nationality, to, from and within Ireland.”

There it is in black and white: freedom of movement to Northern Ireland will continue. Therefore, the only way to resolve freedom of movement to Great Britain is a border in the Irish sea. According to the Prime Minister the backstop is the only issue, but there are so many aspects that have been kicked into the long grass that still need to be resolved to avoid the backstop arising—key matters that the Prime Minister should resolve, but pretends do not exist.

Just last night, the Tories refused to take an amendment to the Fisheries Bill that would see the end of the common fisheries policy by 31 December 2020. The Fisheries Minister admitted that there might need to be an extension of the transition period, so what is there to stop another sell-out of the fishermen? Worse, the Fisheries Minister had to correct the record to confirm that under the backstop Northern Ireland will have tariff-free
access to the EU, whereas Great Britain will not. What is the Prime Minister doing to resolve that competitive disadvantage for Scottish fishermen?

Drew Hendry: My hon. Friend is making a very important contribution. Is it not a fact that the Tories have always seen Scottish fishing as dispensable? In fact, that was actually Government policy when they entered the CFP.

Alan Brown: Absolutely. That is an historical fact. We only had to see the dynamics in the Fisheries Bill Committee last night. The hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) tabled an amendment which he said was only a probing amendment and he then voted against leaving the CFP on 31 December 2020.

All these things are proof that the Prime Minister’s red lines were a con as well, as was the Scottish Secretary’s threat to resign if Northern Ireland was given special status. The Scottish Secretary has refused to even look at the compromises suggested by the Scottish Government. It really is time for the UK Government to acknowledge that for any deal to get through this Parliament, it will have to include the single market and the customs union—something that is more likely to appeal to the EU than further UK demands for concessions.

After two years of our being told that no deal is better than a bad deal, we are now suddenly told, “No deal would be a disaster—but don’t worry about a disaster, because we are planning for it! We are putting arrangements in place.” We have had a Brexit Secretary who did not know how important Dover was, and the Transport Secretary did not visit Dover until October 2018. The Transport Secretary also promised that there would be an aviation deal, and then two years later admitted that discussions had not even begun on the aviation agreement. That is how much of a con this Government’s no-deal preparations are—they are an absolute joke.

It is not a binary choice between a bad deal and no deal. The European Court of Justice ruling means that MPs can revoke article 50. As other hon. Members have always seen Scottish fishing as dispensable? In fact, that was actually Government policy when they entered the CFP.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): I just want to make some brief points, and I will endeavour not to be nebulous. I did not vote for Brexit. I would rather not be where we are, but people were given the choice and we told them that their choice counted, so we are where we are. No deal is not attractive, nor is trying to trade on WTO terms alone. It is especially not attractive for financial services, security co-operation, the digital sector, science and research, and for advanced manufacturing.

The declaration on the future framework offers the pathway for the deepest free trade agreement and the deepest security partnership ever offered by the EU to a non-EU country. It has been agreed unanimously by the Heads of State of 27 EU countries. Five of those Heads of State are Prime Ministers from sister parties of the UK Labour party. Seven of the Prime Ministers are from sister parties of the UK Liberal Democrat party. Last Friday, those same 27 Heads of State made it clear again that they intend to honour that declaration and that they are ready to start the detailed negotiations. Suggesting that the declaration on the future partnership is somehow not meaningful insults the integrity of those 27 other Heads of State.

Furthermore, the withdrawal agreement and the future framework agreement follow the principles that have been supported in numerous resolutions in the European Parliament—in April, October and December 2017, and again in March this year. Those resolutions were all supported by the Members of the European Parliament from the Scottish National party, so I say to the SNP: if you want to avoid leaving with no deal, the best thing to do is to vote for this deal. And I say to the Opposition: if you want to have a motion of no confidence in the Government, table a motion of no confidence in the Government. It is that simple.

4.58 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): As people say, a week is a long time in politics, and today we find ourselves talking about Scottish independence when we were meant to be having a European Union withdrawal debate. One thing that I must say about the debate today is that I believe we are better together in the European Union and in the United Kingdom.

Delaying the vote that should have taken place last week was deeply irresponsible. It is obviously the Prime Minister’s aim to blackmail MPs by saying that other than her deal, there is only a no-deal Brexit. This is playing Russian roulette. The Prime Minister has repeatedly refused to consider any other options. Parliament is now at an impasse. There is currently no majority either for the Prime Minister’s deal or a no-deal Brexit, and in this House we cannot cancel Brexit. The 2016 referendum has taken place and we have to recognise that. However, that does not mean that the result should not have to be looked at again for generations to come. As Parliament cannot agree on a specific Brexit plan, we must take the issue back to the people—including, when we look at the Brexit reality rather than the Brexit fantasy, the question of whether we should stay in the EU. I see nothing condescending to leave voters in that proposal. There is nothing stupid about reconsidering such an enormous issue, and reaching a new conclusion in the light of new information or new facts.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): The hon. Lady is making a powerful point. She is right that people should have the opportunity to look at the issue again. Given that the United Kingdom for which people in Scotland voted in 2014 no longer exists, why is her party opposed to a second referendum on Scottish independence?

Wera Hobhouse: As I said earlier, today we are talking about EU membership. The Liberal Democrats believe in the Union of the United Kingdom. I believe that it is a sign of integrity and intelligence to reconsider a referendum result—and by all means let the Scottish people have another look at that decision. If people want to confirm their previous decision, that is absolutely fine by me.
as well. I believe that there is nothing undemocratic about asking for confirmation or clarification. It is clear that leave voters were split when they voted to leave. There are those who were happy to leave the EU without a deal and who now feel betrayed by the Prime Minister’s deal, and there are those who are happy to support it. The current divisions are most profound among those two camps.

Referendums need not be divisive. They only become so when promises are made that cannot be delivered. The 2016 referendum was divisive because promises were made that could not be delivered. Now Brexit fantasies are hitting Brexit realities. It is therefore not inherently the fault of the Prime Minister that a bad deal was negotiated. Frankly, no other Prime Minister would have been able to reconcile the incompatible demands of the Brexit vote. There is no good Brexit deal. Parliament knows that, and it is right to vote down the Prime Minister’s deal.

The most democratic thing to do now is to return the question to the people, but this time a referendum should be based on facts and not on fantasies. The Prime Minister should stop being afraid of democracy, allow her vote to take place this week, and allow Parliament to do its job and move forward to a people’s vote.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I call Patrick Grady to speak very briefly.

5.2 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am very grateful to have caught your eye, and I will be very brief.

In 2015, the Scottish National party released the speech that Alex Salmond would have given if Scotland has voted yes to independence. If we had won the referendum in 2014, we would have embarked on a programme of nation building, of ambition, of progression and of bringing everyone together, recognising that not everyone would have voted in favour of independence, and recognising and reaching out to the people who voted no.

How that contrasts with what the Prime Minister did in 2016 and what she has done since. She has pandered to the hardest and most extreme Brexiteers on her own Benches instead of trying to bring the rest of the United Kingdom together. That is the legacy with which we have been left today, that is why we have found ourselves in the current farce and impasse, and that is why the deal that the Prime Minister has proposed is unacceptable to everyone and the no-deal contingency planning has had to be stepped up. It turns out that rather than getting £350 million a week for the NHS, we will have 3,500 troops on the streets. No one in the United Kingdom voted for that to happen as a consequence of Brexit, yet that is exactly what we are seeing.

However, the real story of the past few days has not been the contemptible failure on the Conservative Benches—we have known about their chaos for a very long time—but the failure on the part of the Labour party and the Leader of the Opposition, who should have taken his constitutional responsibility seriously and acted a motion of no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government. He is the man who should be the credible alternative in this House, and he has singularly failed to be that. That is because the Labour party is the pro-Brexit Labour party and the leader of the Labour party is the pro-Brexit leader of the Labour party, and that is a betrayal of the people the Labour party is supposed to represent.

It is true that hard-core Labour voters voted leave in 2016, but the job of the Labour party should not simply be to kowtow and run away in fear; it should remake and remake again the positive case for European membership rather than support a Brexit that is going to put those very people out of work and make them less well off.

That may be difficult for the Labour voters in the north of England, but the voters in Scotland have an alternative. The voters in Scotland have a way out: if we want to exit from Brexit, we can do that by exiting the United Kingdom.

5.5 pm

Ian Blackford: I am grateful for the opportunity to have held this debate today and I thank all Members who have contributed to it.

It is clear that Members across this Chamber have significant concerns about the challenges that lay ahead of us. What is even clearer is that, sadly, this Government will dig their heels in regardless of what lays ahead. It has been acknowledged across this House that we have reached a moment in history when Parliament has been systematically undermined by a Government out of control, and when the public have been let down by a Tory party so divided and distracted by its own infighting that it has no regard for the interests of citizens across the UK.

Let me be clear and repeat a comment that has been made by several Members: there is no good Brexit. Our economy will be smaller, our people poorer and the opportunities for future generations limited as opposed to what would be the case staying in the EU. That is borne out by the UK Government’s analysis.

It is an utter travesty that today the Prime Minister chose to sit out this debate, despite the importance of its substance. That is not good enough, and it shows the contempt that the Prime Minister has for the motion granted by the Speaker. Maybe it is the case that the Prime Minister should sit out the rest of the debate on Brexit. She and her Government should stand aside and let the people sort out this mess. Let the will of the people be heard. Let us have a second EU referendum so that we can allow those who have changed their minds, now that they have the facts, to end this crisis and chaos. As democrats, we should have nothing to fear.

We have always made it clear that we would support permanent, continued membership of the single market and the customs union—short of the best option of staying in the EU, that remains our position. The SNP set out our position in “Scotland’s place in Europe” and we have been entirely consistent throughout. However, the reality is, based on the publicly stated position of the other parties in the Commons, that there does not currently appear to be majority support for that option of staying in the single market and the customs union. Therefore, with the EU exit date of 29 March fast approaching and the UK Government in chaos, the urgent priority now is to stop the clock on this disastrous Brexit process by extending article 50. That allows time for options, including another EU referendum, or indeed the Norway option if enough support emerges for it.
Let me clarify that it has always been the case that the SNP’s first option, in line with the wishes of the people of Scotland, is to retain EU membership. A second referendum would be an opportunity to stay in the EU, and with the clock ticking down to 29 March, that is the focus of our efforts.

Compromise options should always remain on the table, but, frankly, we need to be realistic. The opportunity for votes and for debate is narrowing, with the Government denying Parliament and the people a say. It is time for this Government to go. Voices from many in this Chamber have made it clear that they agree with the SNP. This Government are a disgrace. This Government have shown contempt for Parliament; it is a farce. I say again to the Leader of the Opposition—

Three hours having elapsed since the start of proceedings, the motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 24).

### Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords]


Second Reading

5.9 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Every Member of this House will agree that we have a duty of care to the most vulnerable in our society, and that everybody deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, no matter what their physical or mental condition. I hope that the House will also agree that liberty is a fundamental right, and that no decision on the deprivation of liberty can ever be taken lightly. Such decisions can be taken only to protect society or individuals. There are currently 2 million people in this country who have impaired mental capacity. Care homes and hospitals often have to take decisions to restrict people’s movements in order to protect them. That could involve preventing elderly people with dementia from moving, or stopping vulnerable people getting access to things that they could use to self-harm. The present deprivation of liberty safeguards are meant to ensure that people who lack the capacity to make decisions for themselves are not deprived of their liberty unfairly or unnecessarily, but the current system is broken and needs to change.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): What assurances can the Secretary of State give us that local authorities will be given sufficient resources to allow them to process all deprivation of liberty cases?

Matt Hancock: The resource question is an important one, and so too is the process. The question of resources and the question of what the process is go hand in hand. There has been an increase in the amount of resources given to local authorities to enable them to deliver in this area, but the question will undoubtedly arise again as we run up to the spending review.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I visited a police station a couple of weeks ago, and I found that the police lacked adequate training to deal with some of the cases that they were coming across. Has the Minister had any discussions with the Home Secretary about that?

Matt Hancock: Yes, I have. This is an incredibly important point. The deprivation of people’s liberty in a police cell when there is a lack of mental capacity—or, in certain circumstances, when there is a serious mental illness—happens far too often. The purpose of police cells is to detain criminals. Providing a system in which such people do not have to be held in police cells is absolutely critical and part of our plan.

Several hon. Members rose—

Matt Hancock: I want to make a little bit of progress.
For many reasons, the current system is broken. Too many people do not have the protections they need because of a bureaucratic backlog. There are currently more than 125,000 people waiting to be processed, and nearly 50,000 people have been waiting for over a year.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD) rose—

Matt Hancock: I will give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who did a huge amount of work on this as a Minister in the Department.

Norman Lamb: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. I share his view on the extent to which the current system is broken. He will be aware that the Bill came under substantial criticism in the House of Lords, and that substantial improvements were made to it there. There is a recognition, however, that there is still a long way to go. Will he commit to working with the Opposition parties and to meeting us and interested parties beyond Parliament to ensure that by the end of this process we have an agreed Bill that will actually improve people's safety?

Matt Hancock: Yes, absolutely I will. I know that the right hon. Gentleman met the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), yesterday to discuss this question. Of course this ought to be a collaborative process. Improvements were made to the Bill in the other place—I shall talk about those in a moment—but we recognise that further improvements could still be made. Ultimately, there is a careful balance to be struck between the need to protect people who do not have the full mental capacity to take care of themselves and the need to ensure that we do not deprive people of their liberty unnecessarily. That is a careful balance, and we should take this forward on the basis of open discussion and deliberation, rather than of a party political ding-dong.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State is clearly right about the system being broken, and one aspect of that is the shockingly low rate of appeals under deprivation of liberty orders, which currently stands at about 1%. Although the case law has become clearer, in most situations there is a positive obligation on advocates to progress cases to court where somebody is objecting to their deprivation of liberty, either directly or even through their behaviour. In contrast, 47% of detention decisions under the Mental Health Act 1983 are appealed. The Bill’s impact assessment predicts that the number of appeals will halve under the new procedure. Given the amendments that were made to the Bill in the Lords, does the Secretary of State think that the Government should now review that figure?

Matt Hancock: All such considerations should be taken into account and looked at in Committee. We made changes to that area in the Lords, and we are determined to reach the right balance, but I take the hon. Gentleman’s important point seriously. Like anyone who has read the Bill, he will know that it makes a significant improvement in this area. Rather than cases being immediately passed on to the courts, there is a process in place both before the deprivation of liberty where that is possible, which is a big improvement, and then later on when the deprivation is questioned. I accept the thrust of the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, but the Bill makes significant progress, and if he has suggestions for how the details may be nuanced still further, we are all ears because this is very much a collaborative process.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am surprised that this Bill and the reforms to the Mental Health Act are not being considered at the same time. As I understand it, this Bill would allow clinicians and managers to detain somebody for up to three years without a renewal decision, which is much longer than is recommended for community treatment orders by the Wessely review. If both reforms are implemented, patients detained under the Mental Health Act could have the security of a shorter review period than those detained under this Bill. Will the Secretary of State tell me whether that is the Government’s intention or simply a mistake?

Matt Hancock: The hon. Lady is not quite right about the three-year period, because there are review points, meaning that it involves a twice-possible one-year extension, so she is not quite right about the relationship between that and what happens under the Mental Health Act. However, she makes an important point about the links between the Mental Capacity Act 2005, this Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill and the mental health Bill that we propose to bring forward.

We considered putting the two Bills together, but we did not do that for two reasons. First, it would simply be a big Bill that included two separate regimes, and we would not want the full Mental Health Act powers to be applied across the board, and I think there is a broad consensus behind that. Secondly, the view of Sir Simon Wessely, who ran the review into the Mental Health Act, is that we need to get on with this while taking the time to get the Mental Health Act update right. Combining the two was seriously considered, and I considered it again when I became Health and Social Care Secretary and asked for further advice, but we came to this conclusion, which I hope the hon. Lady will support.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I do not disagree with Sir Simon Wessely’s conclusions about that, but the review does contain suggestions that could be transferred into this Bill. For example, the use of tribunals instead of the Court of Protection in some cases would make them a lot simpler, cheaper and better for the person involved.

Matt Hancock: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right. To start to deal with the serious number of cases that we need to make progress with, the interface between this Bill—hopefully on the statute book by then—and the Mental Health Act provisions will be considered as we develop the draft mental health Bill. The truth is that the current system causes unnecessary suffering, and the case for reform could not be more urgent. That is why we are bringing forward this Bill now. Age UK, the UK’s largest charity working with older people, says we have a crisis in the current system that is “leaving many older people with no protection at all... If we lose this opportunity we’re unlikely to get another one in this Parliament and it is profoundly unfair on the older people and their families...to have to wait any longer...doing nothing is not an option.”
Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Has the Secretary of State had any discussions with the Justice Secretary about the application of the measures in this Bill upon those who are serving prison sentences, particularly indeterminate sentences?

Matt Hancock: I have had some discussions on that subject, and I am happy for the hon. Lady to take up that point in more detail either directly with me or with the Minister for Care, or in Committee, because there are significant interlinkages between the two areas.

The Bill builds on the extensive work and recommendations of the Law Commission. It has been fully scrutinised by the Joint Committee on Human Rights and then improved by the other place, as has been discussed. I am grateful for all that work. Ultimately, it is about striking a balance between liberty and protection.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): My right hon. Friend mentions the Law Commission and its suggestions. What he proposes does not quite tally with all the Law Commission’s recommendations. Where are the differences?

Matt Hancock: We built the Bill on the basis of the Law Commission report, but we have put some differences into the Bill. For instance, we think the principle of prioritising people over process is important, and we have strengthened that compared with the Law Commission’s recommendations. The Law Commission improves the law but does not make policy decisions. On top of the Law Commission’s work, which is incredibly helpful, we have made further policy decisions to ensure that people are put more foursquare at the heart of the process. It is true that the Bill and the Law Commission’s recommendations are not exactly aligned, but I would strongly defend our further improvements.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I have the privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on speech and language difficulties. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists is concerned about the conflation of mental capacity with speech and language difficulties. It is important we have provision so that people with speech and language difficulties are appropriately assessed and are not banded up because they are thought to be dangerous. There should be enough training in light of the fact that 60% of people in the criminal justice system have speech and language difficulties.

Matt Hancock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the importance of getting highly trained social workers to make these judgments and about the importance of making sure such training is provided for and embedded in the Bill. He speaks powerfully, and I agree with how he puts it.

The Bill introduces a new liberty protection safeguards system, and it makes the authorisation simpler and more straightforward. It removes some bureaucracy and duplication, and it makes the system easier to navigate for individuals and their family. People will get their rights protections sooner, there will be greater independence when decisions are taken to restrict liberty, and the NHS and social care providers will be given a bigger role in the decision-making process so that people under their care receive the right care and their rights will be protected. It will introduce an explicit duty to consult the person being cared for and to consider their wishes and feelings.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): An appropriate person will be appointed when dealing with vulnerable people. Who are these appropriate people, and what will be their role?

Matt Hancock: An appropriate person will have greater involvement in any decision to restrict liberty, so their role is essentially to speak for those whose liberty is potentially being restricted. We have framed this in terms of an “appropriate person” because in large part this will be a family member or a carer, but that cannot always be the case.

Bob Stewart: It could be a nurse.

Matt Hancock: It could easily be a carer, yes. Some people have no family and in others cases the family are not the appropriate people to be the spokesperson for those who are mentally incapacitated. The appropriate person—the families and carers—will have greater powers to intervene or to object. Crucially, where there is no family or an appropriate person to advocate for the individual, the person has the right to an independent mental capacity advocate. So in all cases there should be a person whose role in the system is to advocate on behalf of the person whose liberty is being restricted.

Paul Blomfield: Does the Secretary of State accept that access to an advocate should not be necessarily subject to a best interest test, as is being proposed, but should be a right?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Just to help everybody, let me say that we have 11 speakers, we still have to hear from the Opposition shadow Minister and we have the wind-ups. So I hope we can take that into account, although I recognise that the Minister is being very generous.

Matt Hancock: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. These are very important points—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps I will have to set it out differently. What I am trying to say is that we have 11 Members to speak and we could try to give them some time. Important as this and giving way all the time is, it is very important that we hear from other people.

Matt Hancock: Noted. Returning to the point made in the intervention, of course if there is an objection, there is a right in this case. So there is an escalation process in the event of an objection.

Before I end, I want briefly to deal with the Opposition’s reasoned amendment, because I hope we are able to show in this debate that all the points they raise have been considered. I hope the House will not mind my taking a moment to address each one briefly. First, they make the claim that somehow the Bill has been rushed through and insufficient pre-legislative scrutiny has been carried out. The Bill follows the Law Commission spending three years developing the new model, consulting extensively. The Joint Committee on Human Rights then conducted an inquiry and pre-legislative scrutiny.
The Local Government Association, Age UK and Sir Simon Wessely have all backed the new legislation now. The LGA says:

“The Bill provides a vital opportunity for long-awaited reform” and it needs to be passed. So we need to get this Bill on the statute book, because every extra delay risks depriving someone of their liberty and their right to freedom unnecessarily, and I do not want to see that happen.

Secondly, the amendment claims that the Bill “enshrines a conflict of interest in relation to independent providers of health and care services”.

Again, that is not the case. Every authorisation must be reviewed by somebody who does not deliver day-to-day care and treatment for the person in question. We plan to go further by tabling Government amendments that will require authorisations in independent hospitals to be reviewed by an external approved mental capacity professional. Finally, the reasoned amendment claims that it is concerned about clearing the backlog in the current system. Well, so are we, and that is what this Bill does. Anyone concerned about the backlog and the current system should back the Bill with enthusiasm.

The claims that this Bill does not put the interests of the cared for person first or address the interface with the Mental Health Act have been addressed already. The very reason we need this legislation is so that we can put their interests first, because they cannot afford to wait for the recommendations of the Mental Health Act review to come into effect, in a Bill that will inevitably take time to develop, because of the need to do this on a consultative and broad basis. While welcoming the probing, I very much hope that the Opposition and every Member of this House will support this Bill, because it strikes a careful balance between liberty and protection. It offers vulnerable people a brighter and better future. We have listened to concerns and we continue to be open to ideas. We have sought to amend and improve the Bill as it has progressed through the other place, and we will make further amendments in this House. I therefore hope that this opportunity to change the system for the better is one that the House recognises. I also hope it will recognise that doing nothing is not an option. That is why I am proud to commend the Bill to the House.

5.29 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill, notwithstanding the need for reform to the current system of mental capacity assessments and while acknowledging the improvements made to the Bill by the House of Lords, because the Bill underwent no pre-legislative scrutiny, it does not put the interests of the cared-for person at the heart of the Bill, it enshrines a conflict of interest in relation to independent providers of health and care services, it fails to provide measures to reduce the substantial backlog of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards Assessments and it fails to recognise explicitly the interface with the Mental Health Act when determining which legislation should be used to authorise care or treatment arrangements.”

The issue before the House today is one of fundamental importance to us all: the individual liberty of vulnerable people. Today, we are being asked under which conditions it is right to deprive vulnerable people of that liberty when they need care and treatment and cannot give their consent, and what protections should be in place when their liberty is taken away.

The proposals in the Bill to replace deprivation of liberty safeguards have the scope to affect the rights of a large portion of the 2 million people in the UK thought to lack capacity to make their own decisions. Among them are people with dementia, learning disabilities, autism and brain injuries. Whether to deprive some of the most vulnerable people in this country of their liberty should be an issue that we treat with the utmost respect, thought and care. However, I am afraid the Government’s approach to this immensely important issue has shown few of those qualities.

The reform of the Mental Capacity Act 2005 requires methodical planning, but the truth is that the Bill has been rushed through without proper scrutiny, despite the best efforts of many people who are concerned about its contents and have been working to change it for the better. The fact that the Bill has less than two hours for Second Reading and was brought forward with just two sitting days’ notice speaks volumes of the speed that the Government are adopting in respect of the Bill, and will raise further concerns among those who care about these matters.

The process of reforming the 2005 Act began when the Law Commission produced a draft framework for new liberty protection safeguards to replace the existing deprivation of liberty safeguards. That came after two years of painstaking work and wide consultation ended last year. The Government accepted the commission’s proposals at the time they were produced, but the Bill that was introduced to the House of Lords has diverged substantially from the original recommendations—an issue on which the Secretary of State answered a question earlier. At the outset of the process, the draft Bill published by the Government was subject to no pre-legislative scrutiny whatsoever, meaning that important stakeholders were not consulted about its contents.

During the Bill’s passage through the House of Lords, my colleagues and I heard many concerns about it from interested stakeholders, from charities representing people with dementia, learning disabilities and autistic people through to directors of adult social services, organisations representing social workers, and social work professionals involved with the current system. They have been unanimous in their agreement that the Bill is deeply flawed, that there has not been adequate time for consultation, and that the proposals in the Bill could cause more problems than they solve.

The Secretary of State quoted a smattering of organisations; let me read him this list: the Relatives & Residents Association, Mencap, the National Autistic Society, Mind, Rethink, the Alzheimer’s Society, VoiceAbility, Disability Rights UK, POhWER, the British Institute of Human Rights, Sense, Liberty, Learning Disability England and Inclusion London have all called for the Bill to be paused so that further consultation can take place. But as we can see today, that call has not been heeded.

Mr Dhesi: Does my hon. Friend agree that, given that Sir Simon Wessely’s review has only just been published, the Government should consider pausing the Bill to look into the interplay between it and the recommendations on the Mental Health Act? Otherwise, we risk creating legislation that fits together very poorly.
Barbara Keeley: Absolutely, we do, and that is a real concern. The Opposition’s concern is that we do not want to end up with a flawed piece of legislation replacing another flawed piece of legislation, and then to have to change it again.

It is worth noting that until yesterday the Government had not even published an equality impact assessment, more than five months after the draft Bill was first presented. Before that, the Government’s only published impact assessment was concerned solely with the cost savings that the new system would bring. That initial impact assessment is now woefully out of date, given the number of amendments made to the Bill in the House of Lords—I understand that more than 300 amendment were tabled. I pay tribute to the work of many peers in the House of Lords, including my colleagues on the Labour Front Bench, who worked to try to improve the Bill, despite the hurdles placed in front of them by the Government. Nevertheless, fundamental problems with the Bill remain that simply cannot be rectified by amendments.

We cannot support the Bill in its current form because, quite simply, it proposes to replace one deeply flawed system with another. I will come onto the flaws in the Bill in due course, but, first, I wish to address the need for substantial reform of the Mental Capacity Act, which we accept. We recognise that the deprivation of liberty safeguards system is deeply complex and bureaucratic, as the Law Commission identified in its report last year. Concerns about the deprivation of liberty safeguards predated even the Law Commission’s report, and we know that a House of Lords Committee declared the DoLS not fit for purpose in 2014.

The scope of DoLS is too narrow, applying only in care homes and hospitals. Authorisations outside care homes and hospitals have to be done through the Court of Protection, which is costly and cumbersome. It is clear, as we have already heard in this debate, that the explosion in the number of DoLS applications after the Cheshire West judgment left the system struggling to cope. The latest figures, as the Secretary of State has said, show a backlog of 125,000 applications. That, of course, leaves the person subject to the application potentially unlawfully deprived of their liberty. If the Government want to resolve that backlog, as they profess to, then the way to do it is to provide local authorities with the resources they need to process all the applications they receive. The Government should not be trying to hide their failure to fund local government behind a streamlined process that does not protect vulnerable people.

Although the deprivation of liberty safeguards need reform, and I agree that they do, the Bill deals with none of the challenges that have been outlined and creates some new problems that cannot be solved simply with further amendments. I am afraid we feel that the Government cannot be relied on to make the necessary changes during the remaining legislative stages given the resistance that they showed to making important changes during the remaining legislative stages given. On the contrary, the Government are more interested in cost saving than in the best interests of cared-for people. This is a crucial point, because there can be disastrous consequences when the best interests of cared-for people are not taken into consideration.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I say this in a spirit of co-operation on such an important issue. The Labour party amendment is to decline to give the Bill a Second Reading. Instead of trying to change the Bill and bring in some of the Law Commission’s recommendations, why, with nearly 200,000 people waiting to have a DoLS assessment, have the Opposition proposed an amendment to reject the Bill out of hand?

Barbara Keeley: That is a question that the hon. Lady needs to put to her own party. What has happened up to this point is that the Government have been asked repeatedly to pause, to carry out more consultation, and to consider redrafting the Bill. There is a list of 40 organisations that have asked for a pause and a redrafting of the Bill. This is a familiar situation from health and social care legislation—it has happened before in this House. The Government could have considered a pause, and the Minister for Care, the hon. Member for Gosport (Caroline Dinenage), knows that I have discussed that with her. The whole question really falls back on the Government.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): My hon. Friend refers to what happened in 2012 with the Health and Social Care Bill. We had to have a pause halfway through its parliamentary stages because it had not been thought through properly. I worry that we might end up having the same thing happen again if the Government do not take heed of what the shadow Minister is so clearly setting out.

Barbara Keeley: I thank my hon. Friend for saying that, and it is the case.

Let me give an example. Just last week, the BBC’s “Victoria Derbyshire” programme exposed the horrific case of Rachel Johnston, a woman with learning disabilities who died after having an operation to remove all of her teeth. Rachel had a long-standing and extensive dental problem, but, clearly, could not consent to the dental work. Rather than doing the surgery in several treatments, the dentist opted to remove all her teeth in one operation, using the Mental Capacity Act to authorise the use of a general anaesthetic because he deemed it to be in her best interest. After being discharged, Rachel bled profusely from her gums, developed breathing difficulties and later died. How on earth can that treatment have been in her best interest? That case shows a need for greater safeguards, not fewer safeguards. We should not allow medical professionals to make decisions without considering the best interests or wishes of people who lack the capacity to consent to treatment.

I recognise that, as the Secretary of State mentioned, the Government conceded in the House of Lords that the cared-for person must be consulted, but there are still worrying aspects of the Bill that undermine that principle. We should ensure that individuals have access
to an independent advocate. That is a vital safeguard that allows people to challenge authorisations, and it should be the default. The manner in which the independent mental capacity advocates can and should be appointed remains ill-defined and even contradictory.

The Minister in the House of Lords, Lord O’Shaughnessy, seems to have dismissed concerns raised about the application of a best interest test before the appointment of an advocate. The role of an advocate is essential to allowing individuals to access appeals and review their rights. Access to support from advocates should not depend on best interest tests, and the provisions in the Bill are far weaker than those proposed by the Law Commission. Yet despite that being pointed out in the debate in the House of Lords, the Minister there seemed unwilling to listen to advice, merely saying that it would work “in practice”. That is simply not good enough. These factors amount to a severe undermining of the concept of the individual’s best interests, which should be at the heart of the Bill but is sorely lacking.

I will now address the backlog of deprivation of liberty safeguard applications, because at the outset the Government presented the Bill as a cost-effective way of reducing it. On Second Reading in the House of Lords, the Minister claimed that the Bill would relieve “local authorities of the...legal liability burden of more than £408 million by removing the backlog of...applications.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 16 July 2018; Vol. 792, c. 1060.]

But he made no mention of how that would happen. Our conclusion is that by attempting to place the onus for assessments on care home managers, the Bill would remove the responsibility from cash-strapped local authorities.

The Government initially tried to pass responsibility for assessments on to care home managers, and that was clearly intended as a cost-cutting measure. That was amended in the House of Lords, but care home managers will still decide whether an assessment needs to take place and will also identify whether the person being cared for objects to a liberty protection safeguard for their own care and treatment. The British Association of Social Workers has said that this presents a potential conflict of interest for care homes, as they need to maintain occupancy and may not readily identify an objector by the cared-for person.

The BASW has a further concern about the grounds on which the responsible body would decide whether it or the care home manager would make the necessary arrangements for an LPS authorisation. There is a significant risk of a two-tier system, whereby local authorities under financial or waiting list pressures would default to care home managers completing the new duties, and other local authorities under less strain would do the assessments themselves. I think we have enough of a postcode lottery in care without adding to it through the Bill.

Care England, which represents the network of care providers, says:

“There is a lack of clarity about the role of the Care Home Manager...the separation of roles between care homes and community care provision seems designed to increase rather than reduce confusion and complexity.”

Indeed, the body is so concerned by this Bill that is has also said:

“This ill-considered Bill risks stoking up a range of problems of a kind that we do not want and should be slowed or returned for redrafting.”

There remains a further dangerous conflict of interest at the heart of the Bill because of the role that independent hospitals are given in the assessment process. Despite debate in the House of Lords regarding the role of independent hospitals, under the Bill they would still be allowed to appoint their own approved mental capacity professionals. That would allow independent hospitals the responsibility to authorise deprivation of liberty for people in that same hospital for the assessment and treatment of mental disorders. That is plainly wrong.

Matt Hancock indicated dissent.

Barbara Keeley: The Minister says no, but Lord O’Shaughnessy in the House of Lords would not consider amendments tabled by two parties to deal with that issue. It is plainly wrong and represents a very clear conflict of interest.

Moreover, the Bill currently allows for the deprivation of someone’s liberty to be authorised for up to three years without review after two initial periods of 12 months, as the Secretary of State said earlier. It cannot be right to have that period of three years without renewal. The Bill is reducing the protections afforded by the current DoLS system, which operates a maximum period of 12 months before renewal.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Lady is outlining, with some good reason, the fact that there may be fewer safeguards and fewer opportunities for people to review or appeal under this Bill than when someone is sectioned under the Mental Health Act. She has a point about the need to look into that point, and to look more broadly at how this Bill sits alongside the Mental Health Act, given Simon Wessely’s review. Does she agree that a pause would be helpful to consider the interface of those pieces of legislation?

Barbara Keeley: Very much so. I will come on to that shortly, but I will not leave the point about independent hospitals, because it is important.

We know only too well from media reports, and the Secretary of State does too, of the torrid situation in independent hospitals that detain people with autism and learning disabilities under the Mental Health Act, and the measures in this Bill could have disastrous and far-reaching consequences. I have raised at the Dispatch Box on several occasions the appalling treatment of people with autism and learning disabilities in assessment and treatment units. I have described the situation as amounting to a national scandal, and I believe that it is still so. As many as 20% of people in these units have been there for more than 10 years. The average stay is five and a half years. The average cost of a placement in an assessment and treatment unit for people with a learning disability is £3,500 a week, but the costs can be as high as £13,000 a week or more.

As the journalist Ian Birrell has exposed in The Mail on Sunday, private sector companies are making enormous profits from admitting people to those units and keeping them there for long periods. Two giant US healthcare companies, a global private equity group, a Guernsey-based hedge fund, two British firms and a major charity are among the beneficiaries of what campaigners have seen as patients being seen as cash cows to be milked by a
flawed system at the expense of taxpayers. According to a written answer I obtained from the Department of Health and Social Care, in the past year alone the NHS has paid out over £100 million to private companies for these placements. Shamefully, the Government cannot reveal how much they have spent since they came to power, because they claim that they did not record the expenditure before 2017. It cannot be right that the Bill potentially gives private companies the power to lock up vulnerable people for years at a time to feed a lucrative and expanding private health sector.

I would like to draw attention to one more issue that the Bill does not address—we have already discussed it—and that cannot be papered over by amendments. The Government commissioned Professor Sir Simon Wessely to lead a review of the Mental Health Act, which is of course long overdue for reform. However, as the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said, there is clearly a complex interface between the Mental Capacity Act and the Mental Health Act. Professor Sir Simon Wessely has made the point that there is now a worrying trend of people, particularly with dementia, being detained under the Mental Health Act when their deprivation of liberty should be dealt with under the Mental Capacity Act. His review recommended imposing a new line of objection to determine who should be treated under which legislation, but, as the hon. Gentleman said, there has been no engagement with these recommendations, which were finalised as this Bill was going through the House of Lords.

In our view, the Government must commit to a review of the interface between the two Acts, with full consultation, which has, to date, been sorely lacking. It is one thing to say that Sir Simon had a conversation with the Secretary of State about this, but that is not full consultation. The consultation must look at both hospital and community settings and provide clear and accessible rights of appeal.

Matt Hancock: Of course the interface between the Mental Capacity Act and the Mental Health Act will be considered, but Sir Simon himself favours bringing forth the Mental Capacity Act renewal now and then dealing with the Mental Health Act later. As with all of the hon. Lady’s other considerations, that has been taken into account, and this is the best way forward.

Barbara Keeley: Well, clearly we do not agree.

The reform of the Mental Capacity Act began as an attempt in good faith to reform a flawed piece of legislation that fails to protect the human rights of some of the most vulnerable people in this country, but it now threatens to infringe those rights further through this Bill. We simply cannot afford to rush an issue of this magnitude where individual liberties and human rights are at stake. Indeed, the Minister in the House of Lords himself admitted:

“We cannot introduce another Bill or piece of legislation that just creates a problem three years down the line.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 16 July 2018; Vol. 792, c. 1110.]

But that is exactly what this Government are trying to do today. We will fail some of the most vulnerable people in society if we allow the creation of flawed legislation that needs to be replaced in just a few years. We must get this right. That is why the Government must pause the Bill, and why I urge hon. Members to vote for our reasoned amendment and ensure that Ministers get the message loud and clear.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I must now introduce a six-minute limit on speeches.

5.49 pm

Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): It is an honour to speak in this Second Reading debate on a subject of real importance to some of my most vulnerable constituents across north Northumberland. I want to focus on one cohort of those for whom the Bill is important: those in care homes.

I first became aware that the deprivation of liberty safeguard system was not fit for purpose as a new parliamentary candidate some years ago, while visiting the excellent care homes across my rural constituency—the small, family-run care homes based in sparsely populated areas that elderly constituents have made their home, some by choice, many placed there by Northumberland County Council and some whose family could no longer care for them at home.

One of the first issues raised with me on those visits—ever since, when the deprivation of liberty system had just been put in place for those who were unable to consent any more—was that the system was proving burdensome and not family or vulnerable person-centric, and that our local authority had become rapidly overwhelmed by the unnecessary layers of bureaucracy, with six separate assessments clogging up the system but failing to ensure protection and reassurance.

The care home managers in my wonderful small and otherwise person-centric care homes were drowning in paperwork and new requirements but could not get the answers they needed quickly from county hall or doctors. It seemed to all those whose careers—indeed, vocations—it is to run care homes that the bureaucracy was simply adding complexity without positive value or outcomes. Much of the work was simply going over the same ground already covered by local authority officials when the decision to place vulnerable elderly constituents into the care home had been made originally.

Busy managers felt they were simply going round in circles, but they were especially concerned by the distress that the system was causing their residents—not only those to whom the deprivation of liberty assessment related, but others with greater capacity who had to watch their co-residents’ anxiety increase and were concerned that when they became that frail, all that would happen to them too.

This Bill is a welcome piece of legislation to provide important safeguarding for our most vulnerable elderly and young adults with severe learning disabilities or autism, to ensure that the system functions better and to reassure us all. Whether it is members of our family or our constituents, we need to have confidence that where restrictions are put in place necessary by the carer of a vulnerable person, the checks in place are streamlined and effective. Good Government policy delivers on its aims. The original 2005 Act failed to do that.
It is encouraging that the Bill will strengthen the protections and rights of vulnerable adults who lack mental capacity and have their liberty deprived. It will introduce a simpler process that involves families more and gives swift access to assessments, which is really important and has been a problem. It will be less burdensome on people, carers, families and local authorities, and it will allow the NHS, rather than local authorities, to make decisions about their patients, allowing a more efficient and clearly accountable process—something that many GPs have raised with me consistently over the years.

The Bill will consider restrictions of people’s liberties as part of their overall care package, which should be a self-evident truth but has not been under the historical legislation, and it will get rid of repeat assessments and authorisations when someone moves between a care home, hospital and ambulance as part of their treatment. We have few ambulances in north Northumberland, and this has been a huge burden for the paramedics who have to deal with these difficult and complex cases. There is enormous frustration, because there is a sense that people are not getting patient-centric care, which is what everybody looking after them wants to achieve. These proposals go a long way towards creating a system that can be trusted by our constituents, and I look forward to working with the Minister to ensure that the Bill reaches the statute book quickly.

5.54 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): First, I declare my interest as chair of the all-party group on social work. This very Bill was the subject of our most recent meeting, when we heard from those working in this sector. These are no doubt some of the most important issues we could be debating and legislating on, and judging by the attendance at the all-party group meeting, it could not be more important to the policy makers and professionals in the field. This legislation governs the rights of individuals and the people who can deprive them of one of their most basic fundamental rights—freedom.

Some of the people attending the all-party group felt the Bill had made some progress with the amendments in the House of Lords, but it is fair to say that the Bill is simply not yet good enough. I really think that the Government need to pause, think again about the implications of the plans that Ministers are putting before us today, listen to the countless charities, other organisations and professionals that work with the legislation every day and then come back with a Bill that is fit for purpose.

This cannot and must not be a basic political argument between the Government and the Opposition; it is a debate between law makers and the people, some of whom at a particular time in their life can be subject to some of the most restrictive legislation we have. It saddens me that this could be another Government measure to cut the costs of associated assessments under the current Act.

There is a wealth of briefing material, from organisations as diverse as the Law Society and the Royal College of Nursing, outlining concerns that need to be discussed and addressed through the legislation. There are serious issues with potential conflicts of interest, but I think the Minister knows that. Imagine a scenario in which a care home manager is making a decision on someone’s life but has a financial interest in making a judgment either way. The Royal College of Nursing shares my concerns on this. Care home managers may feel under pressure in their workplace, meaning that they may make decisions that are not always in the best interests of the person they are caring for. There should not be any vested interest—only an interest in the wellbeing and freedom of the person concerned. Issues have already been raised about private hospitals. A private hospital could authorise deprivation of liberty, knowing that it would benefit financially from that. I know that the vast majority of people are honest and work in the best interests of those they care for, but such judgments should be made by a genuinely independent person.

My hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) mentioned the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. There is a real and genuine risk that people may be wrongly deemed to lack mental capacity because any communication needs they have are not properly recognised. Nothing short of full staff training on communication needs—for everyone in the system—would be satisfactory as a measure to ensure that people are being assessed correctly and that any additional needs are addressed.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very sound point. Given the importance of communication and of being able to assess people correctly, does he agree that it may be beneficial to add speech and language therapists to the list of approved mental capacity professionals, which would benefit some of the people being assessed?

Alex Cunningham: That is not something that has previously come to my attention, but I am sure the organisation would very much like to look at that possibility.

Following on from that, there must be a suitably qualified person carrying out the assessments and they must also be independent. A skilled approved mental capacity professional should be involved before a person is placed in an institution, not just when there is an objection or a trigger. There needs to be further clarity on the role of independent mental capacity advocates. Considering that the Bill in its current draft would allow responsible bodies to detain someone without renewal for up to three years, leaving people deprived of their liberty for inappropriate lengths of time, it is essential that there is genuine independence when it comes to such an assessment.

Dr Poulter: The hon. Gentleman is making some very good points. I am sure he is aware that, for a section 2 or section 3 admission to be approved under the Mental Health Act, there needs to be a second-opinion doctor—it is good practice for that doctor to be independent—and a social worker to ensure that the section admission takes place. It therefore seems extraordinary to me that, in a similar situation where there is an issue of capacity to be decided, there is not the safeguard of a second opinion, given that the decision may last for three years.

Alex Cunningham: I would certainly bow to the expertise of the good doctor and acknowledge exactly what the hon. Gentleman says. These second opinions and safeguards are absolutely essential, and I do not see such cover in the Bill at the moment.
Another concern I want to highlight is the lack of consultation and clarity about extending the scheme to 16 and 17-year-olds, and the risk that the new scheme will make it easier for authorities to remove young people from the care of their families, despite the family objecting. The Government must go back and give careful thought and consideration to the risk that 16 and 17-year-olds could see their liberty restricted inappropriately.

This issue has already been mentioned, but I too am concerned about the fact that there is no real acknowledgement of the interface between the Mental Capacity Act and the Mental Health Act, although the Secretary of State said it would be considered. I am not an expert in this area, but does the Minister not agree that, as the Wessely review on the Mental Health Act has only just been published, the Government should pause to look at its recommendations properly, rather than risk creating legislation that does not fit together? Professionals must be able to understand the differences in regime and to clearly decide which is most appropriate.

We are dealing with changes to the law that any of our relatives, or even ourselves, could be subjected to in the future. We cannot just bounce this through the Commons and potentially hand substandard powers to a group of people who could rule the roost over an older person, a middle-aged person or a teenager, with nothing at all that their families could do about it.

There are plenty of people out there who are experts in this field; they could have been consulted and heard if there had been pre-legislative scrutiny of the Bill. I have some questions and concerns that have been raised by some of the organisations out there. From Inclusion London: does the Minister agree that the Bill makes it clear that deprivation of liberty cannot be used as a way to deliver care in the cheapest way possible? From the Royal College of Psychiatrists: can the Minister confirm to deliver care in the cheapest way possible? From the Law Society: will the Government consider the interaction between the Bill and the Mental Health Act, as set out in their recently published review? Will they take the time to do that properly?

There are many other questions from many other organisations, and I hope that we have real time to address them if the Bill gets into Committee. I gather that the programme motion suggests that the Bill should come back towards the end of January, and there will not be a lot of time in January to consider the real issues. I just hope that the Minister will listen to that point.

6.1 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Let me start by welcoming the Second Reading of the Bill and by declaring an interest as a registered nurse who has used the current legislation in clinical practice. I therefore welcome the provisions in the Bill, which amend and reform the current legislation.

The Mental Capacity Act 2005 was a groundbreaking piece of legislation, which, for the first time, provided safeguards not just for those without capacity, to enable decisions to be made about their care, but for healthcare professionals, families and friends who were having to make the most difficult decisions in the most difficult circumstances.

In terms of the deprivation of liberty aspects of the legislation, there is no doubt that, after 10 years, reform is urgently needed. The DoL system has become too cumbersome and too bureaucratic, and it is not responsive enough to patients’ changing needs. I therefore fully support the Law Commission’s report last year, which recommended that DoL be repealed and replaced. The Bill delivers those reforms.

There was a huge amount of debate in the House of Lords, and many amendments were tabled. The Government were in listening mode and accepted many of those amendments. Therefore, it is disappointing to see the Opposition amendment before us today, which simply states that we should decline to give the Bill a Second Reading. There will be plenty of opportunities in Committee and on Report for Members to lay down amendments about the concerns they have. This is such a serious issue, and there is such a backlog of cases; we are talking about the most vulnerable people in our society, and to leave them waiting for assessment or languishing with a DoL system in place that is clearly not working—we have a huge body of evidence that shows that—is irresponsible. If Opposition Members have concerns—many of them have raised genuine concerns today—I urge them to table amendments to address them, and not simply to reject Second Reading out of hand.

At the Lord’s Committee stage, concerns were raised, and the Bill has been amended accordingly. There are four measures, in particular, that I welcome. First, the scope of the Bill was extended to 16 and 17-year-olds. That is a welcome move, which will ensure that they are covered by the new legislation. In addition, I welcome the fact that family and friends will be able to trigger a review if there is an objection. That possibility does not exist in the current legislation. I also welcome the fact that the person we are discussing will be part of the consultation. Although they cannot make an informed choice, because they lack capacity, it is important to continue that dialogue with them, because they are the most important people in the whole process. I welcome the introduction of safeguards in relation to conflicts of interest and care home providers undertaking assessments. That was recognised as a genuine concern and the Bill has been amended as a result.

I still have a concern about independent hospitals. It would have been helpful if Opposition Members had tabled an amendment to reflect that concern. We want to ensure that the proposed legislation covers patients who move between various sectors—independent hospitals, care homes or NHS hospitals—in all scenarios. There is a feeling that there is a gap that still needs to be bridged and perhaps that could be considered in Committee.

I want to make a final point, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what I know is not the responsibility of UK Government Ministers. I sit on the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. Only last week, the Committee heard evidence from mental health professionals about people who lack capacity in Northern Ireland. There is actually no legislation in Northern Ireland, compared to the rest of the UK, on mental capacity. While there is no Northern Ireland Assembly and no Northern Ireland health Minister, that will remain the case. It is a huge concern that while
UK Ministers are amending current legislation to make it more adaptable and responsive to patients' needs, vulnerable patients in Northern Ireland have no legislation to cover them. There are healthcare professionals working in Northern Ireland who do not have safeguards to protect them. I urge Ministers to have discussions with the Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Ministers to see whether something can be done until the Northern Ireland Assembly is up and running.

As a healthcare professional who has used the existing legislation, I am encouraged by the changes proposed in the Bill. I welcome the reform of the legislation to protect the most vulnerable, to protect healthcare workers in that setting, and to protect family and friends. I welcome further debate in Committee.

6.6 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I want to start by reinforcing the point that the Bill deals with an issue of profound importance: the deprivation of a citizen's liberty and the circumstances in which that can be done. That is why it is so vital that the measures are properly and closely examined and scrutinised. This is particularly important when dealing with people who potentially cannot object to the deprivation of their liberty. There is a real need for robust safeguards to be in place to ensure the least restrictive care possible in all cases and to restrict liberty only if that is genuinely in the best interests of that individual.

The system that the Bill seeks to reform is clearly not fit for purpose. The Joint Committee on Human Rights reached that clear conclusion. After the Cheshire West ruling, which actually happened during the period when I was a Minister, we have seen the development of a massive backlog, in particular because of the broadening of the definition of what constitutes the deprivation of liberty. It is therefore imperative that we sort that out. If we think about it, here and now we are routinely flouting people's human rights. All those people on the backlog waiting list are being deprived of their liberty without proper authorisation. That is intolerable and it is why I resist the idea that we should just stop this process and leave in place the current wholly imperfect system.

When we think about reform, it is vital that we replace a flawed bureaucratic system with an effective robust system with proper safeguards, not another flawed system. It is very important to recognise what turned up in the House of Lords. My colleague Baroness Barker commented:

“This is one of the worst pieces of legislation ever brought before this House.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 11 December 2018; Vol. 794, c. 1247.]

That was the view of many peers when the Bill first appeared in the House. I pay tribute to peers on all sides. I know my Liberal Democrat team did an incredible amount of work, but they worked with Labour colleagues and, I should say, the Minister Lord O'Shaughnessy. He collaborated with peers on all sides to improve the proposed legislation.

Barbara Keeley: The comment from Baroness Barker, who did some great work in the House of Lords, was made on Third Reading; she still described it then as one of the “worst pieces of legislation” that they had seen in the House of Lords.

Norman Lamb: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for her intervention, because I was just coming on to the comments that Baroness Barker added on Third Reading. She said that although it had become better legislation, it was still “highly deficient, but not as bad as it was.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 11 December 2018; Vol. 794, c. 1247.]

That, Minister, is not a ringing endorsement of this legislation. That is why it is critically important that the Government do what they say they will and collaborate to improve it, because improvements are absolutely necessary. Our assessment will be at the end of the process: is it workable? Does it genuinely respect and safeguard individuals' human rights? Does it result in very vulnerable people being better protected than they are under the existing, highly flawed system? On those tests will we decide whether to support the Bill on Third Reading.

My plea to the Minister is, as we have discussed, to meet us well before the Committee stage. Do not rush headlong into the Committee stage. I am alarmed that we are talking about that happening at the end of January, given what else is going on then. Be in no doubt that if we do not sort out the flaws that still exist, I will work with others across the House to make sure that the Bill is defeated on Third Reading, because the stakes are so important.

I want to end by highlighting some of the key issues that need to be sorted out. First, many viewed the impact assessment that was presented to the House of Lords as based on fantasy, even before all the amendments were made there. I understand that it is being updated, but it is really important that it is a credible and robust document and, critically, that, along with the impact assessment, the new system is properly resourced. If it is not properly resourced, people's human rights will continue to be flouted.

Secondly, there needs to be a published equality impact assessment. There has not been one yet. That is not acceptable. The Government need to get on and publish anything that they have produced. If they have not done the work on it, they need to get on and do that.

Thirdly, there are continuing concerns about really important conflicts of interest of independent hospitals and care home managers, who will still carry out consultations. Independent hospitals, as I understand it, are still able to authorise the deprivation of liberty within the hospital. When financial interests are at stake, there will be those who behave badly and who are prepared to act to keep a bed filled to earn the money from that individual—the “cash cow”, as the shadow Minister suggested. That is why robust safeguards are absolutely critical.

Fourthly, we need a clear definition of the “deprivation of liberty”, and the Minister has indicated that that will be forthcoming.

Fifthly, there are the renewal periods. I understand—the Minister made this point to me yesterday—that we do not want a tick-box exercise when it is clear and obvious to everyone that the arrangements are in that person's interest, but there is something very concerning about our moving in the opposite direction to what Simon Wessely's review said should happen with regard to the Mental Health Act 1983, where we would see improved
safeguards. Here, however, we are talking about a longer period between reviews and renewals, and that seems to me to be a real concern.

Sixthly, there is the interface with the Mental Health Act—please get this right, because if we legislate and report later, it will be too late and people will lose out as a result. My final comment is: listen to us, talk to us and talk to the interest groups to make sure that we get this right.

6.14 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who has such expertise in this area and brought such valuable content to this debate as well as a valuable tone, which was very good to hear. I want to say a few things, first, in support of the Bill. As the right hon. Gentleman said, it is very important that we take a moment to reflect on the significance of getting this right.

Depriving someone of their liberty is a very significant act. Liberty is a fundamental right and freedom. We must take it seriously, and we must get this right. It is clear that the current system is not working. The fact that between 100,000 and 200,000 people are waiting because of an applications backlog is clearly unacceptable and cannot continue, given the consequences for individuals who have been deprived of the safeguards to which they are entitled, and the impact on their families and on care homes in which they may be residing.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Earlier today I had a chance to speak about this matter to the Minister and some of her officials. Is it the hon. Lady’s understanding that the issue of human rights has been included in legislation that has been endorsed by Age UK, the Law Commission and Simon Wessely? If that is the case, the action that the Minister and the Government are taking this year is right, because it brings everyone together and ensures that there is legislation that everyone in the House can support.

Helen Whately: The hon. Gentleman has made a good point about the support for the Bill. Some Opposition Members have suggested that there is not much support for it, but it is, in fact, widely supported. Yes, there are concerns, with which I shall deal shortly, but, as the hon. Gentleman has said, there is widespread support for improvements in the current system. Those improvements include simplification—less bureaucracy and fewer administrative burdens—and the critically important representation of individuals through the independent mental capacity advocates, which will give them a voice. The frequency of assessments will become more appropriate; as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said earlier, timings can be inappropriate and excessively burdensome. There is a better choice of language: the Bill removes the term “unsound mind”, which is very stigmatising and completely unnecessary. I am also pleased that the Government have listened to the concerns expressed by some of my constituents about, for instance, potential conflicts of interests for care home owners when a financial interest may be involved.

However, I have three outstanding concerns. First, there is the question of how the amended Act will work for people with severe mental illnesses. The Bill clearly focuses on those who lack capacity because of, for instance, dementia, learning difficulties, autism or brain injuries, but, if I understand it correctly, it could be applied to people with severe mental illnesses. Figures suggest that the current Act is applied to a significant number of people in such circumstances. We know that such illnesses—bipolar disorders, for example—are likely to fluctuate, and that as a result people’s capacity may also fluctuate. That could cause them to be detained and deprived of their liberty when, in fact, they have regained capacity. The Minister in the Lords, Lord O’Shaughnessy, gave a commitment that that would be addressed in the code of practice, but may I press this Minister to ensure that there are sufficient safeguards in the Bill?

Norman Lamb: Does the hon. Lady agree that, given the cohort that could be covered by both pieces of legislation, it is particularly important that the approach be consistent?

Helen Whately: I completely agree, and that relates to my second concern, which others have mentioned and which relates to the interaction between the Bill and the 2005 Act. In his review, Sir Simon Wessely suggested that there should be a new dividing line between the two. I hope the Minister will explain how that will work.

My third concern is whether the Bill will address a situation that I suspect many of us have encountered, when elderly people are locked into their homes. When I have been knocking on doors, I have sometimes been told, “Do not knock on that door; because the lady there has been locked in by her family, and she becomes very distressed and upset if someone rings the doorbell because she cannot answer the door and she does not understand why.” This is clearly a completely inhumane way to treat people, but it is happening. People are being detained at home without appropriate safeguards for their safety as much as anything, so I ask the Minister to say whether the Bill can address this problem, or are there any other steps we might take to deal with the issue of people being inappropriately locked in at home and deprived of their liberty?

I appreciate the spirit in which this Bill has been presented to the House, and the willingness of the Government to listen, as they have already shown as the Bill has been going through the Lords. I have listened to Opposition Members, but think there is widespread support for the Bill among interest groups and experts. I look forward to the Government continuing to listen and improve the Bill so that we have a better system sooner rather than later.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. I am anxious to make sure everybody gets in so I must now reduce the time limit to five minutes.

6.20 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): We judge a civilised society by how it treats its most vulnerable citizens, so getting this legislation right is vital. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) said, “There by the grace of God go we all,” and I agree:
we could all find ourselves or family members involved in this. The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) raised the issue of the Cheshire West case, which demonstrates that we do need change because we have got people whose human rights are being denied at the moment. It is not the case, therefore, that we can just do this at our leisure.

Is the Bill flawed? Yes, in its current state it is, but change needs to happen among the voluntary sector and others and we need to put some principles behind this, and one of them must be putting the person at the centre of the legislation. We should also only use these measures where there are no alternatives; they should not be used as a recourse of first resort or for financial or convenience reasons.

The review of the Mental Health Act 1983 introduced the least restriction principle and that should be written into this Bill. It is also key to ensure that individuals and families not only know their rights, but have access to them. Also, the length of detention should be kept to a minimum, and certainly kept under regular review. The care plans of individuals must be kept up to date with the individual's situation, too. The access of individuals and families to independent medical advocates must be a central part of this Bill as well, and if people do not have family or relatives an independent advocate should be appointed to them automatically. The possibility of conflicts of interest has been raised and I am not yet happy that this Bill addresses that. There are issues that need to be looked at. Referring to the Mental Health Act again, having second opinions is important; we must tighten that up in this Bill.

A lot of this could be covered in the code of practice. The Government have not yet produced that, and it needs to be produced before the Bill goes any further. It would also be important for it to be incorporated into the Bill.

Reference has been made to the interface with the review of the Mental Health Act. I have read it and know Simon Wessely, and he is clear in that report that he does not want this legislation held up, and he does not think that fusing the two Acts would be a way forward. He makes a suggestion on how to use the two Acts: for objection we use the Mental Health Act, and for not having capacity we use this mental capacity Act. He also deals with the issue of cases that cover both, offering some ideas around tribunals and judges and court protection. I would also like the Minister to address the issue around 16 and 17-year-olds and how this interplays with the Children Act 1989 which gives certain rights to parents.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk said that the situation needed to change, because people are now being detained who are not having their human rights observed. I have to say that I agree with him, and that is why I cannot support the reasoned amendment. Throwing the Bill out at this stage would be a huge mistake. I plead with the Minister to look at a number of things. The delaying of the Committee stage that the right hon. Gentleman mentioned would be important, and I believe that we should extend the sittings of the Committee if we need to. We ought to take as much time as possible in Committee. With good will, we can get there.

Is the Bill perfect? No, it is not, and I am not happy with it as it is outlined, but we can get some changes into it. I know that the Minister is an advocate for the sector and that she is passionate about doing the right thing, and it is not beyond the wit of man or woman to get to where we should be. To throw the Bill out at this stage would be a mistake, because my fear is that it would not come back, owing to a lack of legislative time. That would mean that the legal crisis would continue. Also we would be missing an opportunity to change the legislation. We can make the necessary changes if the good will is there.

6.25 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I speak as a member of the Joint Committee on Human Rights. We looked at this whole issue generally in our report in June, and we looked more specifically at the Bill in October, so I declare that interest. Article 5 of the European convention on human rights sets out the right to liberty and security. It says that no one shall be deprived of their liberty “save… in accordance with a procedure determined by law”. That essential safeguard applies to all those who are deprived of their liberty, not just people in the criminal justice system, and so it should. The previous system involved the deprivation of liberty safeguards, which were criticised by the House of Lords Committee on the Mental Capacity Act 2005. The Committee found that “far from being used to protect individuals and their rights, they are sometimes used to oppress individuals, and to force upon them decisions made by others without reference to the wishes and feelings of the person concerned.” So reform is most definitely needed.

The only guidance that the Mental Capacity Act 2005 gives to the courts is that “references to deprivation of a person's liberty have the same meaning as in Article 5(1) of the Human Rights Convention.”

The Supreme Court, as has been mentioned, has defined deprivation of liberty in an “acid test” that covers all those who are under “continuous supervision and control” and “not free to leave”, regardless of their condition or contentment. It was logical of the Supreme Court to do that, but it has none the less meant that hundreds of thousands of people who were not previously considered as being deprived of their liberty may now be so considered, and 125,630 people have been unlawfully deprived of their liberty between 2017 and 2018.

Just as importantly, this definition causes real anguish to many people and their families. We heard evidence from parents whose children are now considered to be deprived of liberty, despite being content and cared for in their own home by devoted family members. I shall give the House a couple of examples. Mark Neary told us that his son Stephen was “very much king of his castle in his own place. He requires 24/7 support, which is either me or a member of the support team. It was decided last week that Stephen is being deprived of his liberty in his own home on the basis that, first, he is not free to leave, because you need support workers to go with him when he goes to the shop or goes swimming, and secondly, that he is under constant supervision.”

Graham Enderby told us that we had “gone so overboard after this judgment it is ridiculous”. Keeping to the current definition will mean that any system of authorisation would have to be either extraordinarily expensive or minimal. As we said in our second report on this issue, “a scheme which applies too widely will be so light touch as to reduce protection for those who truly need it.”
For those reasons, the Committee recommended that Parliament use this opportunity to give the courts guidance about an article 5-compliant definition of liberty that will ensure that the safeguards are focused on those who need them. We noted two possible ways in which that might be tackled. The first was to focus on whether the deprivation of liberty was the result of an underlying condition, or whether it was caused by continuous supervision and control. The alternative was to revisit the whole notion of valid consent. Those who lack mental capacity cannot, by definition, give legal consent, but as we have heard, in practice it is possible in many cases to tell whether a person is content with his or her support.

We were disappointed, when the Bill was introduced, that the Government had not tackled that issue. We were also disappointed that the scheme that was initially proposed did not have sufficient safeguards for people who were going to be the subject of the new liberty protection scheme. However, I am pleased to see that the Government have listened, and that during the Bill’s passage through the House of Lords it has been amended to make it explicit that there is a duty to consult the cared-for person about their care arrangements. There were many other amendments that I do not have time to go into now. I am also pleased that the Government have now undertaken to bring forward an article 5-compliant definition of liberty, and we look forward to that extremely important step.

Some concerns remain, however. We must consider whether people should be able to give advance consent to care arrangements. I understand the Government’s position is that advance consent could date from many years before care was put in place, that people may “give up” their human rights in long-stay settings, and that people could feel pressurised into making advance consent arrangements when they did not wish to do so. We understand those concerns, but they can be mitigated with sufficient safeguards to enhance the personal autonomy of cared-for persons. I also remain concerned that the right to advocacy is not robust enough. The provision of advocacy is essential for ensuring that cared-for persons can exercise their right to challenge authorisations, and article 5 guarantees everyone the right to challenge their deprivation of liberty before a court. I am pleased that amendments strengthening the right to advocacy were made in the Lords, but they may not go far enough.

This important Bill needs careful and thorough consideration, so I fully support the recommendation that the Bill’s Committee stage be extended.

6.30 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I speak as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on speech and language difficulties, so my primary concern is that people will have their freedom taken away simply because they cannot be understood rather than due to a mental capacity problem. The Minister will know that this is a big problem, with something like 10% of children entering school having a speech or language difficulty. Some 60% of young people in the criminal justice system have a speech or language difficulty, and yet speech and language therapy reduces reoffending from 39% to 26%, so it is a cost-effective intervention at that stage and would be even more cost-effective beforehand. Some 81% of children with emotional and behavioural disorders have unidentified language difficulties. Left untreated, 33% of children with speech and language difficulties develop a mental illness, and half of them commit crimes.

In other words, it is important to identify and provide support for people in such situations because, as we have already heard, it can cost £13,000 a week to keep someone incarcerated, but that may be happening simply because they have not been properly understood and have not received the support they needed. There is therefore a financial and moral onus on us to identify and provide therapy to reduce and reverse the development of mental health problems linked to speech and language difficulties.

The situation at the moment—it will be the same under the Bill—is that assessors often will not and do not recognise speech and language difficulties or cannot differentiate between them, and they often do not know how to support the client and communicate their needs.

Rebecca Pow: I support all the hon. Gentleman’s comments. He is making a strong case. Does he believe that staff training on communication ought to be included in the Bill, and that speech therapists should be included in the list of approved mental capacity professionals?

Geraint Davies: I was going to make precisely that point. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists has said that the list of professionals should include such therapists and that all professionals carrying out assessments should have speech and language training so that they can identify the issues that they currently do not identify and provide clients with support. I ask the Minister to consider the Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, which requires that support must be provided for communication.

When people are deprived of their liberty, that comes through their lack of capacity to consent, which is questionable if there has been no proper assessment of speech and language difficulties. The person may have a mental disorder, and the action that is taken must be necessary and proportionate. If they object, a review is carried out, but there is no requirement that a speech and language therapist should be involved in the review, which is another change that needs to be made.

The central point is that speech and language problems do not mean a problem with mental capacity, but they are commonly misread as such, which obviously costs the public sector a fortune and costs thousands of people their liberty. As has already been asked, I ask the Minister to look carefully at these issues over a longer timeframe, because we are in danger of rushing this through under the heat and smoke of Brexit, and everything else, and we risk denying the liberty of people whose liberty should not be denied and costing the public sector a fortune when that money would be better invested in preventive treatment such as early intervention for speech and language problems.

6.35 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I will be brief, as I am aware that others wish to speak.
The privilege we have as a Parliament is to defend liberty, so any action we take to seek to deprive a person of their liberty should always be weighed against their best interests. I was not greatly aware of the deprivation of liberty safeguards until the Bill was tabled and I received lots of representations from constituents who work in the social work sector. They are concerned that, although the Bill may be well meaning, it does not necessarily have at its heart protections for the best interests of the people to whom it might apply. I have always listened when a doctor tells me something is not right and I am unwell, and we should listen when a social worker tells us that the Bill’s provisions for depriving a person of their liberty fall short of their expectations.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) made two excellent points. First, if we are to take away a person’s liberty, there has to be no possibility that the process could be abused for whatever purpose. I fear that, in some of the arrangements for moving away from a local authority-based system to a responsible body, the potential exists, however small that potential may be, for an unscrupulous person who is not necessarily working in the best interest of an individual to exercise that power simply to maintain a business model in their own facility or care home. Such cases may be few and far between, but we have seen many situations across the country where one or two individuals have taken advantage of people in vulnerable situations, and I am not convinced that the Bill, as currently written, goes far enough to provide safeguards.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Gareth Snell: I am sorry, but I cannot give way.

My other area of concern is the independence of advocates. I am fortunate to have a family who can speak up if a relative were ever in such a situation, but there are countless people across the country who do not have somebody who can stand up for their best interest and represent what might be right for them. The Bill contains no provision properly to strengthen the independent advocacy rights and make them robust so that everybody who might be subject to the liberty protection safeguards is able to be represented and have their views considered, which is important.

I suspect the Bill will get its Second Reading, and I hope several of those holes will be identified and considered in Committee. At the moment, my fear is that the Bill is well intentioned but simply does not bear scrutiny. There is therefore a potential for exploitative people to take advantage of vulnerable people and, as a Parliament, we must make sure to address that.

6.39 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), who spoke with characteristic concern for his constituents and characteristic courtesy. I am grateful to him.

In the brief time available, I will argue why it is inappropriate for the Government to be rushing this Bill through Parliament. There are three reasons: the potential for an unscrupulous person to exercise power without considering the best interests of the person to whom it might apply; the Bill’s lack of clarity on responsibility and resourcing; and the lack of calibration between this Bill and the much more carefully thought through and inclusive approach of the recent review of the Mental Health Act. As I detail those objections, I will refer to the specific concerns mentioned to me by my constituents.

I am well aware, as is everyone who has spoken on this Bill, that the current system is not functioning appropriately, but there has been a need for change since at least 2014. The question is whether we have had sufficient time to consider whether these measures are the appropriate ones, and I would argue that we have not. We had a discussion about the equalities impact assessment just now. I saw that a webpage was produced just yesterday with an equalities impact assessment allegedly produced in December—presumably giving the impression that it was produced yesterday. It refers to the independent review of the Mental Health Act being sure to report at the end of this year, but it has already reported. This is a dog’s dinner and we cannot have it in relation to such a significant piece of legislation. We know about all the amendments made in the other place, which we have discussed. In that context, the time allocated to this Bill is just insufficient.

Even in this debate, we have seen the lack of clarity. The Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, seemed to be unaware of expert calls for advocates being available to all, not just those objecting. He also did not agree with a comment made by a colleague who said that the new approach would potentially allow the deprivation of liberty for three years. However, the equalities impact assessment I just referred to, albeit that it is a flawed one, says that the Bill provides that authorisations could last up to three years where appropriate—after two initial authorisations of up to one year—compared with a maximum of one year under the existing DoLS system. The Government seem to be rushing this new approach in because of the existing backlog of DoLS cases dating from 2014, but it is not clear to me that the new measures will deal with that.

The Secretary of State said earlier that there would be a larger role for healthcare providers, but that seems to contradict what was stated in the other place. I am confused, and I think others are too, and that ambiguity is leading to the significant concerns expressed by many stakeholders about the potential for a conflict of interest. He said he would deal with that by tabling amendments in Committee, but in my experience we have not always seen that collaborative approach in Committee from the Government. I hope we will see a change, but presumably others can understand why there might be concerns about that.

It is unclear how local authorities and clinical commissioning groups will be able to perform their role expeditiously under these measures in the current financial climate. No fewer than 38% of assessments under DoLS in Oxfordshire required more than a year to be performed, while 25% required more than a year—compared with a maximum of one year under the existing DoLS system. The Government seem to be rushing this new approach in because of the existing backlog of DoLS cases dating from 2014, but it is not clear to me that the new measures will deal with that.

We know about all the amendments made in the other place, which we have discussed. In that context, the time allocated to this Bill is just insufficient.

Even in this debate, we have seen the lack of clarity. The Secretary of State, who is no longer in his place, seemed to be unaware of expert calls for advocates being available to all, not just those objecting. He also did not agree with a comment made by a colleague who said that the new approach would potentially allow the deprivation of liberty for three years. However, the equalities impact assessment I just referred to, albeit that it is a flawed one, says that the Bill provides that authorisations could last up to three years where appropriate—after two initial authorisations of up to one year—compared with a maximum of one year under the existing DoLS system. The Government seem to be rushing this new approach in because of the existing backlog of DoLS cases dating from 2014, but it is not clear to me that the new measures will deal with that.

The Secretary of State said earlier that there would be a larger role for healthcare providers, but that seems to contradict what was stated in the other place. I am confused, and I think others are too, and that ambiguity is leading to the significant concerns expressed by many stakeholders about the potential for a conflict of interest. He said he would deal with that by tabling amendments in Committee, but in my experience we have not always seen that collaborative approach in Committee from the Government. I hope we will see a change, but presumably others can understand why there might be concerns about that.

It is unclear how local authorities and clinical commissioning groups will be able to perform their role expeditiously under these measures in the current financial climate. No fewer than 38% of assessments under DoLS in Oxfordshire required more than a year to be performed, according to the latest statistics. That is not just because of the regime; it is also because of funding constraints. The Oxfordshire County Council has just announced that it will be cutting its contribution to mental healthcare funding. It has one of the lowest levels of mental health
funding in its budget compared with other healthcare funding. Just as with lengthening waiting lists for accessing mental health provision, if we do not deal with this resource issue we will only hit the brick wall of inadequate funding.

Lastly, I wish to say that that review of the Mental Health Act involved thousands of service users from the off. In fact, it had someone who had been sectioned as a vice-chair. We have not had that level of inclusion in respect of this Bill.

6.43 pm  
Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Coming here tonight, I thought that this was in origin a well-intentioned but flawed Bill, but after listening to the Secretary of State I am not sure we are discussing the same legislation. It is hard to believe that in a free society such as ours, probably more than 125,000 people are currently denied their lawful liberty because of failings in the system. We need to improve the situation, not make it worse.

As with much of this Government’s legislation, the Bill seems to be more about reducing costs than protecting and promoting the rights of vulnerable people. As we have heard, the impact assessment was produced before a raft of Government amendments were made, so there is now a clear argument for producing an updated assessment before we proceed. The attempts to transfer some of the responsibilities set out in the Bill just do not make sense. I am not sure it is wise to transfer any responsibilities for things such as liberty to bodies such as CCGs. They are already very stretched and prone to questionable judgments on delivering equality and fairness in the NHS.

There are real doubts about the protections in the Bill. Access to legal aid is a Catch-22 if a person qualifies for it only after they have been deprived of their liberty. How can that be fair? There is also concern about the length of detentions and authorisations. Sir Simon Wessely recommended that initial detention should be reduced to three months, with a three-month renewal and six-month periods thereafter. Under the Bill, despite what the Secretary of State claims, a person can be subject to an order for three years.

The Bill does not put the interests of the cared-for person at its heart. The existing arrangements explicitly state that deprivation of liberty may be granted only where it is in the best interests of the cared-for person. The Government should make it clear on the face of the Bill that depriving a person of their liberty must be in their best interests, and should come only after the consideration of less restrictive options.

Proposals must ensure the right of a person to object to and challenge arrangements if they so wish, and that they have appropriate support and representation to do so. Access to an approved mental capacity professional is currently available only in limited circumstances. That is wrong: access should be made available in all cases. Scrutiny for pre-authorisation reviews should be extended to all situations in which a person might be considered vulnerable.

All cared-for people in private hospitals should have an independent mental capacity advocate appointed, and all authorisations must be carried out with approved mental capacity professional oversight. Independent oversight is essential in all cases, as cared-for people may not be able to object in the formal sense. Appropriate advocacy must therefore be available. The Royal College of Psychiatrists rightly draws attention to its concern that no one should have their liberty denied because of a mental disorder without first being seen by a qualified doctor.

It is essential that these matters are dealt with properly, which is why there are real concerns about the role of the care home manager. It is wrong that they should make the decision on independent representation. As drafted, the Bill makes the care home manager responsible for carrying out the consultation with the cared-for person, when the main purpose of that consultation is to ascertain that person’s wishes. Nor can it be right that the choice of assessor should lie with the care home. There is an obvious conflict of interest if independent health and care providers are responsible for both providing a service and deciding on that service’s suitability. The Bill allows for managers of independent hospitals to authorise deprivation of liberty when care is being delivered in their hospital. That is plain wrong.

6.48 pm  
Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have participated in this important debate. There have been many worthwhile and thoughtful contributions from all parts of the House, including from my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones), the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), the hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Anne-Marie Trevelyan), my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) and for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), and my hon. Friends the Members for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe).

The Bill was supposed to be a welcome proposal to simplify a complicated system, but what is before us is equally problematic and will not fix the fundamental challenges that it was supposed to fix. That point was eloquently articulated by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North. Put simply, the Bill has been rushed from start to finish. It has not received the meticulous and careful planning that befits legislation about the human rights of the most vulnerable people in our society.

The Government have shifted the goalposts. First, they agreed with the recommendations of the Law Commission’s draft Bill, but the Bill before us has only five clauses, compared with the Law Commission’s 15 clauses. The Law Commission consulted widely with stakeholders over a two-year period, but the Government did not consult those stakeholders even once before developing their much-changed Bill. Do they think they know better than the Law Commission, which spent years developing its draft legislation? I know from my own discussions with those stakeholders the serious concerns about how the Bill has proceeded. Surely the Government should have started consulting them at an early stage rather than proceeding at what Mencap, the National Autistic Society and many others have called “a breakneck speed”.

[Anneliese Dodds]
There are other examples of the Government acting hastily. There has still been no code of practice, and no definition of “deprivation of liberty”, on which much of this whole debate hinges. As the noble Lord, Lord Poulter, pointed out earlier, the Bill’s equality impact assessment was published only yesterday—that is not good enough—and despite what the Government say, it was not simply an update of a previous impact assessment in the House of Lords. That impact assessment, which is now completely out of date, discussed only the savings that the new system would make for the taxpayer. This process has been bungled to the point that Baroness Barker called the Bill the worst piece of legislation ever to have come before the House of Lords. It was clearly designed with one thing in mind: to save money on dealing with the backlog of DoLS applications.

We accept that the backlog that has arisen since the Cheshire West judgment, which widened the scope for what constitutes a deprivation of liberty, needs dealing with. That could be done through properly resourcing local authorities to deal with the problem, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) pointed out earlier. We know that the Government initially intended to solve the problem by foisting this responsibility on care home managers. Leaving aside the massive pressure that this would add to already overstretched care home managers and the worryingly high vacancy rate of care home managers, this would have created a dangerous conflict of interest. Thankfully, that was amended in the House of Lords, but an equally dangerous conflict of interest remains in the role that has been given to independent hospitals. It simply cannot be right that this House legislates to give independent hospitals, so many of which are detaining people for years on end under the Mental Health Act, a similar ability under the Mental Capacity Act. It is totally unacceptable to enable them to determine whether appointing an independent mental capacity advocate is in someone’s best interest. It could create the very conditions that my hon. Friend described so harrowingly earlier. We could see even more Bethanys, and that would be a truly horrifying prospect for this House.

It is only down to the tenacity of the noble Lords, including my colleagues on the Labour Benches in the other place, that vital concessions to address some serious problems with this Bill. However, this Bill still falls far short of what is required. This debate has discussed the concept of an individual’s best interest, which should be at the heart of this Bill. If that were the case, the Government would have implemented the Law Commission’s recommendations in full. There are still several areas where the Government have diverged fatally from the Law Commission’s recommendations.

This Bill did not adopt the Law Commission’s recommendation that independent mental capacity advocacy should be available on an opt-out basis and not dependent on a best interest test. There are still worrying shortcomings in the arrangements for approved mental capacity professionals, and there has been no consideration of the interface between the Mental Capacity Act and the Mental Health Act, which has recently been the subject of review by Sir Simon Wessely. Sir Simon made important recommendations about the overlap between those Acts. The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) suggested a pause to consider that interface, and I concur with him on that.

This Bill is simply not fit for purpose. We cannot and must not rush legislation that deals with fundamental human rights. The Government must pause and take stock of the concerns that are being raised by so many voices urging them to revise these disastrous proposals. Some excellent suggestions have been made in this debate this afternoon. It is time to stop and think again.

6.53 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Our liberty is one of the most fundamental of our human rights. Depriving people of that liberty is something that must be done with the greatest of care and with respect for individuals, and not as a tick-box bureaucratic process—a one-size-fits-all—that leaves vulnerable people without protections and in an unspeakable backlog. That is what we are facing today.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions today. I will aim to cover all the questions that have been raised and will write to anybody whose points I do not get to. I start by stressing from the outset that liberty protection safeguards are not about detention, but about appropriate arrangements being in place for the purposes of care and treatment.

We have heard it argued that the Bill has been rushed through. The Law Commission looked at this issue for three years, and the Joint Committee on Human Rights has looked at it. The Department of Health and Social Care has spoken endlessly to stakeholders. We are determined to get this right, but we continue to consult people across both Houses in order to do so.

Let me address the issue of three-year authorisations. This was a Law Commission recommendation, and the provision is geared towards people like my grandmother, who live with dementia—people with long-term progressive conditions from which they are unlikely to recover. Their families tell us that they are part of an unnecessary and intrusive measure that they have to repeat every single year, when there is essentially no way that their loved one’s condition will improve. It is in such scenarios that the Bill allows the flexibility to deliver tailored protections that best support the individual depending on their needs.

The three-year renewal can be used only after two one-year renewals. Furthermore, the responsible body is required to specify a continuous programme of reviews if a person’s circumstances will change. That will address the issue of fluctuating conditions that was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately). We will also set out further details of fluctuating conditions in our code of practice.

The right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones) talked about the code of practice, which will be a statutory document. It will be co-produced in consultation with the sector, the Local Government Association, the Association of Directors of Adult Services and the third sector, and it will be laid before both Houses. It will not be in the body of the Bill, because the problem at the moment is that there is a one-size-fits-all process in legislation, but people will have to pay regard to this statutory document.

The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned 16 and 17-year-olds. We have given very careful thought to how to include 16 and 17-year-olds and to how the Bill will interact with other legislation including the Children...
Act 1989, and we are very comfortable that it works alongside existing legislation. It is also a Law Commission recommendation to bring the provisions in line with the Mental Health Act, as he will be aware.¹

Under the Bill, every authorisation must be reviewed by somebody who does not deliver the day-to-day care and treatment of the person. That is how we will avoid a conflict of interest for care home managers and independent providers. We want to drive a culture where independent hospitals are considering appropriate arrangements and where there are less restrictive alternatives available. This was also one of the Law Commission’s recommendations. However, we need to ensure that there are sufficient safeguards, which is why, in addition to introducing the consultation duties and the role for appropriate persons or independent mental capacity advocates, we will be tabling an amendment to ensure that every individual in an independent hospital setting will be assigned an approved mental capacity professional to complete the pre-authorisation review. That is regardless of whether the individual or their family object to the deprivation of liberty.

The hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies) talked about speech and language. It is vital that communication needs are considered where relevant, and we would expect that a speech and language therapist will be consulted in order to establish the individual’s wishes and feelings. It is really important that those wishes and feelings are very much at the centre of the process.

Members have spoken about the interface with the Mental Health Act. We have broadly recreated the current interface with that Act. The Mental Health Act review did make recommendations on that interface, but Sir Simon Wessely himself said that the Government need to consider the implications of the interface as part of the consideration of that Act. He said that the reform of DoLS cannot wait when there are 48,000 people waiting more than a year for protections to which they are entitled.

If the Opposition’s amendment succeeded, we would be stuck in a broken system with a bureaucrat backlog, in which 125,000 people are waiting for protections. Professor Simon Wessely said that this Bill strikes “a better balance between the importance of care planning and the provision of (all too often) perfunctory and box-ticking procedural safeguards around that care.”

That makes it clear that action must be taken.

Through this Bill, we are ensuring that people’s wishes are always considered and respected, and that people are safe, cared for and looked after. We are talking about changing a system that is currently not fit for purpose. We have attempted to be collaborative at every stage of the Bill so far. We are driven by a relentless desire to make it as strong and effective as possible and worthy of the vulnerable people we are seeking to protect. We want their loved ones and healthcare professionals to have faith in it, and we will never swerve from our commitment to what is necessary, proportionate and in the best interests of the individual. We commit to working with individuals across this House to make sure that this Bill is in the very best possible shape.

¹[Official Report, 7 January 2019, Vol. 652, c. 1MC.]
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McKinness, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Mearns, Ian
Morris, Grahame
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onasanya, Fiona
Onn, Melanie
Onsurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipsion, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruan, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheeran, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snelld, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symsonds, Nick
Thomberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Twill, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Therma
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
Thangam Debbonaire and Jeff Smith

**NOES**

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Sim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Burghart, Alex
Burg, Mr Richard
Burns, Rhys
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishi, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Dr Therése
Collins, Damien
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Double, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dudridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Ephicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frey, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Halton, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollowbome, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keeghan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Philip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Liddington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
MENTAL CAPACITY (AMENDMENT) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A (7)),
That the following provisions shall apply to the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords]:

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

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee
(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 24 January 2019.

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

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

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

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

Other proceedings
(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Mike Freer.)

MENTAL CAPACITY (AMENDMENT) BILL [LORDS] (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1) (a)),
That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees.—(Mike Freer.)

MENTAL CAPACITY (AMENDMENT) BILL [LORDS] (MONEY)

Queen’s recommendation signified.
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1) (a)),
That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Mental Capacity (Amendment) Bill [Lords], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Mike Freer.)

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),
That the draft Markets in Financial Instruments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 24 January 2019, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 19 December (Standing Order No. 41A).
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to motions 7 and 8, which, with the leave of the House, I will take together.

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

Betting, Gaming and Lotteries
That the draft Gaming Machine (Miscellaneous Amendments and Revocation) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 November, be approved.

Question agreed to.

Exiting the European Union (Postal Services)
That the draft Postal and Parcel Services (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 29 October, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Exiting the European Union (Companies)
That the draft Accounts and Reports (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

The Deputy Speaker’s opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 19 December (Standing Order No. 41A).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): With the leave of the House, I will take motions 10 to 13 together.

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

Electronic Communications
That the draft Privacy and Electronic Communications (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 1 November, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Merchant Shipping)
That the draft Merchant Shipping (Recognised Organisations) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 12 November, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Financial Services and Markets)
That the draft Capital Requirements (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 November, be approved.

Exiting the European Union (Financial Services)
That the draft Bank Recovery and Resolution and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 23 October, be approved.—(Mike Freer.)

Question agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): We now come to motions 14, 15, 16 and 17, which, with the leave of the House, I will take together.

CHURCH OF ENGLAND MEASURES
Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).

Ecumenical Relations Measure
That the Ecumenical Relations Measure (HC 1687), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure
That the Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure (HC 1688), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

Church Property Measure
That the Church Property Measure (HC 1689), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.

Church of England Pensions Measure
That the Church of England Pensions Measure (HC 1690), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, be presented to Her Majesty for her Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.—(Dame Caroline Spelman.)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS
UK arms export to Saudi Arabia

7.16 pm
Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on the Government’s sale of arms to Saudi Arabia on behalf of my constituents in Cambridge. It was set up by OxCam, the University of Cambridge’s—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. Will hon. Members leaving do so quietly? We want to hear the petition from Daniel Zeichner.

Daniel Zeichner: The petition was set up by OxCam, the University of Cambridge’s Oxfam group. I was approached by Thea Augustidis, the OxCam campaigns officers, who asked me to present this petition to Parliament, bringing this important issue to the attention of MPs across the House.

The petition states:
The petition of residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that the government’s sale of arms to Saudi Arabia is unacceptable, as there is substantial evidence that these arms are being used to kill innocent civilians in Yemen. This is in direct breach of the UK arms export policy, which states that the licenses cannot be granted if there is a “clear risk” the arms might be used in a serious violation of international humanitarian law.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to: suspend all arms transfers to members of the Saudi coalition carrying out attacks in Yemen, including weapons, arms, munition and ammunition, parts and components and other equipment that pose a substantial risk that they could be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian law in this conflict.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Daniel Zeichner: [P9002305]
Funding for mental health provision in Cumbria

7.18 pm
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I seek to present a petition signed by 2,500 of my constituents that condemns the fact that only 75p per child is spent in Cumbria each year on preventive mental health care.
[Tim Farron]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to end the 75p per head allocation and give Cumbria the money it needs to keep our young people mentally healthy and support those who are in the early stages of experiencing mental health problems specifically by funding a mental health worker for every school and college in Cumbria.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom, Declarations that huge Government cuts to the public health budget have left Cumbria being able to spending £75,000 on Tier 1 preventative health measures for young people which works out at just 75p per head; further that back in 2015, the coalition Government made a spending promise of £25m per year for Cumbria’s public health budget, but the Conservative Government broke this promise and now allocates £7m less than originally promised for the county.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to end the 75p per head allocation and give Cumbria the money it needs to keep our young people mentally healthy and support those who are in the early stages of experiencing mental health problems.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

Green Deal Scheme

7.19 pm

Ged Killen (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents who have been affected by Green Deal mis-selling. This was a Government-backed scheme that my constituents believed they could trust. However, many of them were conned by unscrupulous installers and rogue salespeople, including HELMS—Home Energy and Lifestyle Management Ltd—based in my constituency, which was approved under the scheme. This was through no fault of my constituents and the Government must act to resolve this injustice. The petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to ensure that the Government will compensate and protect people who have found themselves suffering a detriment because of this Government-backed scheme, and take steps to ensure that this cannot happen in the future.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Rutherglen and Hamilton West,

Declares that the Government-backed Green Deal Scheme has adversely affected residents of Rutherglen and Hamilton West both financially and psychologically; further that many residents have, in good faith, invested their life saving or accrued several thousands of pounds of debt to pay for work that was carried out by companies approved by the Green Deal Scheme; further that in some cases the work including the installation of insulation and of solar panels, was incomplete; further that some were sub-standard and in many cases residents were given incorrect information which led them to believe that they would save or make money when in fact they have simply lost money; and further that in other cases the installer did not apply for building warrants and as a result they are unable to sell their properties, or have the peace of mind that their homes are safe to live in, or that the insurance policies residents continue to pay are valid without a building warrant.

The petitions therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compensate financially and protect people who have found themselves suffering in this way after signing up to this Government-backed scheme using Government-approved installers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

7.20 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Up to 169 households in my constituency of Central Ayrshire may be affected by the mis-selling scandal of Home Energy Lifestyle Management Ltd. Many elderly people were led to believe they were receiving insulation and solar panels free, provided by the Government, under the Green Deal scheme, only to find they were tied into long-term financing. In some cases they were even tricked into signing away their electricity feed-in tariff, meaning they have received no benefit, only debt. In addition, some installations were faulty, causing roof damage. The failure to secure building warrants means they cannot even sell their homes. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to financially compensate and protect people who have found themselves suffering in this way after signing up to this Government-backed scheme using Government-approved installers.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Central Ayrshire,

Declares that the Government-backed Green Deal Scheme has adversely affected residents of Central Ayrshire both financially and psychologically; further that many residents have, in good faith, invested their life saving or accrued several thousands of pounds of debt to pay for work that was carried out by companies approved by the Green Deal Scheme; further that in some cases the work including the installation of insulation and of solar panels, was incomplete; further that some were
Democratic Republic of the Congo: Presidential Elections

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Mike Freer.]

7.21 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): The Democratic Republic of the Congo is scheduled to hold a presidential election in only five days’ time, on 23 December. This historic election could see the country’s first-ever democratic transfer of power, or bring further instability and violence to a country riven with human tragedy and despair. It is essential that this House and the Government send the strongest possible message today that we will settle for nothing less than a free and fair election, and that working with our international allies we will take punitive action against the regime should they attempt to steal the election. Conversely, as the DRC’s second largest bilateral donor, in the event of a free and fair election, we stand ready to support a new democratically elected President to face up to the mammoth challenges that lie ahead.

The country will only move forward with new leadership committed to a vision rooted in economic growth and poverty reduction. That will only be possible with better governance and a plan to end horrendous levels of violence and endemic corruption.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): How will this election affect the endemic corruption in the DRC, which is even worse than in Nigeria where I am a trade envoy, and how will it deal with the 2.7 million internally displaced people?

Mr Lewis: I agree entirely with the hon. Gentleman’s concerns. The international community has poured billions of pounds into the DRC over many, many years. Until the leadership of that country changes so that it is transparent, open and accountable to the people, and free of corruption, we will not see the kind of changes that the people of the DRC have a right to expect. That is why this presidential election is so crucial. Without a change of leadership, we will not see the kind of changes that are so necessary and which the hon. Gentleman articulates.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this matter for an Adjournment debate. I have always had an interest in the politics of Africa, in particular the DRC. He knows that the level of violence against those who are eligible to vote, in particular women, is very high. How does he see the elections taking place when that violence is being targeted at voters? How does he feel the Government can ensure that people are safe to vote? The democratic process must go ahead and the voters must be safe. How will that happen?

Mr Lewis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the question of violence. As any Member of this House who has visited the DRC and spoken directly to victims of violence—particularly, women who have been victims of sexual violence—will know, there is not a more horrendous or horrific example anywhere in the world of rape being used as a weapon of war. Therefore, the ability—I will come to this later—of that country to protect voters from the threat of violence is central to having free and fair elections.

As hon. Members have alluded to, it is important to understand the scale of the challenge. The DRC is a country of some 80 million people and has a landmass the size of western Europe. According to the World Bank, with its 80 million hectares of arable land and over 1,100 minerals and precious metals, the DRC has the potential to become one of the richest countries on the continent and a key driver of African growth. That is almost the irony of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Between 2005 and 2012, the poverty rate has decreased only from 71% to 64%, and the DRC ranks among the poorest countries in the world. It was 176th out of 187 countries on the UN human development index. As of 11 December, as hon. Members will be aware, there have been 505 suspected cases of Ebola, including 457 confirmed cases, and at least 296 people have died. I know that this country has made a tremendous contribution to trying to contain the outbreaks of Ebola that we have seen.

UNICEF said that the humanitarian situation in the DRC has deteriorated dramatically just over the past 12 months. That is from an incredibly low base. A surge in violent conflict in the Kasai and eastern regions has forced more than 1.7 million people from their homes. The number of internally displaced people has more than doubled since January 2017, reaching 4.1 million, the highest number in Africa. More than 13 million will need humanitarian assistance this year alone, including 7.8 million children, and 13.6 million people are in need of safe water and adequate sanitation and hygiene facilities. Some 7.7 million people are facing severe food insecurity, which represents a 30% increase since 2016, and a shocking estimated 2.2 million children will suffer from severe acute malnutrition this year alone.

The country continues to experience frequent and deadly disease outbreaks, including measles and malaria, and is undergoing one of the worst cholera outbreaks of the decade—that is in addition to Ebola. Grave violations of children’s rights, including forced recruitment, killing, maiming and sexual violence, are key features of the conflict. Violence and insecurity are seriously impeding access to basic education for 3.4 million children across the country.

Recent UNICEF data show that more than 3,000 children have been recruited by militias and armed groups over the past year alone. According to an April 2014 UN report, sexual violence remains “extremely serious due to” its “scale…systematic nature and the number of victims.”

Human Rights Watch talks about the “horrid levels of rape” and other forms of sexual violence used by all armed groups in the conflict, which has been destabilising the country for several decades. Unfortunately, members of the country’s armed forces are among the main perpetrators of this violence.

As the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) suggested, as the DRC goes to the polls, the stakes have never been higher. This election will decide who succeeds President Kabila, whose second and final term expired on 20 September 2016. The promised elections have been delayed until now. Kabila has been in power since 2001. Many had feared that he would never relinquish
power, but largely as a result of pressure from the international community, he reluctantly agreed to step down. However, he has nominated a chosen successor, Emmanuel Shadary, who, due to his actions as a member of the Kabila Government, is currently subject to European Union sanctions. Opposition parties in the country fear that the electoral process will be a sham, orchestrated by Kabila, who wants to stay in power at any cost. They believe that the regime will do whatever is necessary to steal this election.

Kris Berwouts, of the African Studies Centre, wrote only last month:

“If the Congolese government manages to organise the elections in time, it will organise them in order to win them. It will deploy all the pressure, fraud, intimidation and violence necessary to do so. The chances of free and fair elections are nil. That is why the authorities are deploying heavy repression against any potential watchdogs. Congolese journalists and observers bear the brunt of this, but foreigners are also targeted.”

If the international community is serious about its commitment to peaceful, credible elections, it would be wise not to ignore the wisdom of the Congolese people regarding the conditions needed for legitimate elections.

In that context, I should like the Minister to address a number of specific concerns. I thank him in advance for his politeness in contacting me today to discuss some of them.

Electronic voting machines will be used for the first time in these elections, and civil society groups fear that they are not secure enough and there is a possibility of the results being rigged. The United States ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, has affirmed the US belief that the DRC should stick to the tried and tested method of paper ballots. The technology for the machines was created by a South Korean company which built similar machines for elections in Argentina last year, but the devices were subsequently rejected because of security issues that made them vulnerable to hackers.

In fact, Congolese law does not provide for the use of voting machines, although that has been denied by the electoral commission in the DRC. I should add that there is a question mark over the commission’s independence in the entire process. It has also claimed that changing the system would mean delaying the election. According to a review of the devices by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, they have not been thoroughly tested, and there is a potential for long delays and also, crucially, for abuse and misuse.

Earlier this month, 7,000 of 10,000 voting machines in an electoral commission warehouse in the capital, Kinshasa, were destroyed in a fire. The Kabila Government blamed unidentified “criminals” for the blaze, but the warehouse was being guarded by their army. The destruction of the machines is therefore highly suspicious, and, obviously, reinforces the concerns about the use of such machines. There are also concerns about the voters’ roll, which has revealed that 6 million voters have not been fingerprinted. It would aid transparency, and would be incredibly helpful, if the UK Government could argue that the electoral commission should publish the names of the people concerned and the areas in which 50% of fingerprints have not been obtained. That would establish whether it was a case of random distribution or evidence of dubious practices.

It is also essential, even at this very late stage, for the international community to seek an agreement between the armed forces and the United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo—or MONUSCO—for a MONUSCO brigade to be deployed to guarantee safe, free voting in eastern and central parts of the country. That point was made by the hon. Member for Strangford. If such an independent force is not deployed, there is a real risk that people will be intimidated by the threat of violence. There are also concerns about the lack of observers. Analysts and activists have warned that if polls are seen as fraudulent, the country could face years of protests. Civil society organisations are operating in a highly restrictive political environment, with regular threats to employees and their families.

Finally, should the outcome of the elections become a matter of intense dispute, that could lead to further upsurges in violence across the country, some parts of which, especially the east, are seriously affected by intractable conflicts. Africa Confidential reports—that is shocking—that some national army officers are even talking in terms of a “third Congolese war”, with troops from neighbouring countries potentially becoming drawn into the DRC once again. Although the international community has poured much money and effort into the DRC over the last 20 years, there are justified fears that, in the end, a Shadary victory could be met with international acquiescence.

Let me make this point very strongly to the Minister. In the past, our Government and others of successive political persuasions have chosen perceived stability over democracy and free and fair elections, and, on those grounds, have often not called out elections as being illegitimate when they clearly have been. This country’s last best chance for the next decade, in the context of the human tragedies that I have described, is to determine whether the result of these elections demonstrates that they were free and fair. I call on the Minister, and the UK Government—who, because of their donor status and their diplomatic reputation, still have a tremendous amount of influence in that country—to take a very tough line, even at this late stage, in putting pressure on the DRC Government.

7.34 pm

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) for securing this timely debate and I know he has considerable expertise on the DRC. He is a long-standing advocate for the Congolese people, and I think I am right in saying that he has visited the DRC very recently. The Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin), would have been delighted to respond on behalf of the Government tonight, but unfortunately she is unavailable and it is my pleasure to take her place.

I note the concerns expressed about the presidential elections that we hope will take place on Sunday and whether they will lead to the first peaceful and democratic transfer of power in the country’s history, and about whether the UK is doing enough to help ensure that they are free, fair and credible. We of course want an election result that is all of these things, and most of all we want a result that can be readily accepted by the
people of the DRC, and over the next few minutes I hope to reassure the House that we are doing all we can to help to bring this about.

The Congolese people are understandably impatient for stability and security, and this Government agree, and this is important not only for the DRC but for the region as a whole. We have always been clear in our messaging that only credible and inclusive elections will deliver that long-term stability, and indeed the prosperity, that the DRC desperately needs. So this Government will always condemn acts that hamper democratic processes wherever they take place, but it would be wrong to prejudge these elections before they have happened, and the UK’s approach will be informed by reports from local and international observers, who must be allowed the space to make a full assessment.

Members might recall that in 2016 the UK joined the international community in condemning President Kabila for holding on to power after the expiry of his second presidential term, contrary to the country’s constitution.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare my interest as the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to the DRC. What assurances has the Foreign Office received about the impact of the warehouse fire and the destruction of voting machines in Kinshasa in a strong opposition area? The Minister referred to the observers, who have largely been paid for by Her Majesty’s Government; we have recruited some 22,000. What assurances has the Foreign Office got that those observers will be doing an entirely independent and effective job?

Sir Alan Duncan: I will come on to the issue of electronic voting in a moment, and if my hon. Friend has further concerns I will ask my hon. Friend the Minister for Africa to write to him.

In order to prevent Mr Kabila from amending the constitution to permit himself a third term, the international community pressed him to sign the Saint-Sylvestre accord, setting out the terms for establishing a transitional Government which would work towards elections in 2017. Since the accord was signed in December 2016, the UK has repeatedly called on Kabila to honour both the DRC constitution and the Saint-Sylvestre accord, and to enable a peaceful transfer of power through credible elections. Our then Minister for Africa made these points directly to the President when he visited Kinshasa in November last year.

The UK continues to work with the international community, including the African Union and the Southern African Development Community, to press the DRC authorities to meet the democratic aspirations of the Congolese people by electing a new president.

Jim Shannon: I understand that this is not the Minister’s portfolio, but I want to ask again about something the hon. Member for Bury South (Mr Lewis) mentioned and I referred to in my earlier intervention. We were very clear that we are having all the observers there but it is also important to have security so that people can physically go to vote; has an assurance on that been sought and given?

Sir Alan Duncan: I totally accept that someone can only be an effective observer if they have the security around them, so the hon. Gentleman makes an important point.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend and to Her Majesty’s Government for all their support. Will he particularly commend the role played by the Catholic Church and other Churches in the Saint-Sylvestre accord of 2016, and also their continued striving for peace and democracy in the DRC?

Sir Alan Duncan: My hon. Friend has an amazing reputation for his interest in Africa, and I totally share his judgment. I agree with what he has just said.

We are concerned that some candidates have been prevented from moving and campaigning freely around the country, that activists from all sides have been subjected to violence, and that some candidates have used inflammatory language. The UK issued a joint statement with the American, Canadian and Swiss ambassadors in response, which condemned all forms of violence as well as expressing regret at the news of the recent fire at an electoral commission warehouse in Kinshasa, to which the hon. Member for Bury South referred.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the fact that electronic voting machines were being used for the first time in this poll. The DRC electoral commission—known as CENI—will be responsible for their operation. In response to a request from CENI in February, we funded the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to carry out a technical analysis of the electronic voting machines. The WFD’s report is publicly available on CENI’s website, and it notes that it is not best practice to introduce the machines on this scale without a pilot. However, it does not endorse or reject their use, because this is a sovereign decision for CENI and the DRC. The report provided a number of recommendations to mitigate the risks associated...
with using the machines, many of which have been adopted by CENI. All the major presidential candidates have now indicated that voters should use the machines.

In addition to our support for the electoral process, we also run an extensive programme to alleviate the humanitarian situation in the DRC. This includes our support for the World Health Organisation-led response to the Ebola outbreak in the east of the country, where we are the second-largest bilateral donor. More broadly, we are working to improve the humanitarian and human rights situation in the DRC through advocacy work, through bilateral projects and programmes and through our support of multilateral interventions such as the UN peacekeeping mission, MONUSCO.

We help to fund a programme run by the UN’s Joint Human Rights Office to document human rights abuses. We continue to call on the DRC Government, as a member of the UN Human Rights Council, to demonstrate their commitment to the highest standards of human rights and to take decisive action against abuses and violations. With the EU, we have established a sanctions regime against members of the Government responsible for the violation of human rights. We have made it clear that we are prepared to take further action as necessary, including against those who seek to obstruct the democratic aspirations of the Congolese people. We will continue to use all channels available to us to end human rights abuses in the DRC, to press for accountability, and to demand a better future for the Congolese people. I hope I have shown that the UK is engaging closely with the electoral authorities and civil society in the DRC to support free, fair, safe and credible elections on Sunday.

Mr Ivan Lewis: Given that this is not the Minister’s portfolio, I thank him for giving such a comprehensive response. Will he make it clear today to the current regime that if there is strong evidence that the elections were not free and fair as a consequence of its actions, there will be accountability through whatever measures the UK and the international community deem fit, including the potential for further sanctions?

Sir Alan Duncan: We want to see the highest standards applied to these elections, and we will monitor them very closely. If we feel the need to express a view afterwards, we will of course do so both in this House and more widely.

I hope that what I have said on the Government’s behalf tonight shows that we hope that everything we are doing helps to address some of the root causes of the DRC’s many problems and that the elections provide the political stability the country needs in order to build the secure and prosperous future that the Congolese people rightly crave. That stability is vital not only for them, but for the region. This Government are clear that we will continue to provide support to help the DRC to achieve that longed-for stability and prosperity.

Question put and agreed to.

7.46 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 19 December 2018

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

Cabinet Office

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office was asked—

Leaving the EU: Contingency Planning

1. Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): What discussions his Department is having with stakeholders on contingency planning for the UK leaving the EU without a deal.

Mr Lidington: The Government’s policy is for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union with a negotiated deal. Individual Departments are responsible for briefing businesses and other interested parties about contingency planning for all eventualities, and the Cabinet Office is co-ordinating contingency planning across Whitehall.

Colin Clark: Will my right hon. Friend give details of which Departments have been allocated moneys for no-deal preparation, how much, and the spending timescales?

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury announced yesterday details of a £2 billion planned spend for 2019-20. These moneys would be available for either a no-deal or a deal scenario. The largest recipient Departments are the Home Office, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and the Department for International Trade.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): In the event of no deal, we read in the press that the Government are going to inform the public about what they should do to prepare for it. Will the Minister outline for us what exactly the Government will say to the public of this country about how they should prepare for no deal?

Mr Lidington: As I said in my earlier response, it will be for the Secretary of State in each Department to determine what forms of communication are necessary to businesses or the wider public. I say to the hon. Gentleman that the message that we get back again and again from the general public is that they want Members of Parliament from both sides of the House to get on and agree the deal that is on the table.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): With reports of DEFRA making contingency plans to slaughter a large amount of livestock, what reassurance can be given to livestock breeders in my constituency looking at a no-deal Brexit?

Mr Lidington: I think it unavoidable that, given the World Trade Organisation’s standard tariffs for livestock trade and the position of third countries in relation to the EU’s legal requirement for phytosanitary checks and inspections, there will be difficulties for our livestock exporters in the event of no deal. That is another reason for the House to agree the deal that is available.

Jo Platt (Leigh) (Lab/Co-op): After last week’s shambles, we are now 100 days away from our scheduled departure from the EU without having voted on any deal in the House. We are now staring at a cliff-edge no-deal exit, which would be damaging not only for our economy, but potentially for our national security. In the event of no deal, with what assurances can the Minister provide the House that the Government have discussed with stakeholders our continued security partnership with the EU, including on cyber-related matters?

Mr Lidington: The Home Office and other Departments with the responsibilities for security interests are in constant touch with the police and other relevant agencies about those matters. I say to the hon. Lady, as I have said to others in the House, that what is needed is for every Member in the House to take seriously his or her responsibility and not to keep ducking the question.

Civil Service Relocation

2. Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to move civil service jobs out of London as part of the Government’s industrial strategy.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): We are committed to supporting economic growth across the United Kingdom. We have established the Places for Growth programme to relocate civil service roles to the regions and nations. That creates a presumption that newly created public bodies will be located outside London.

Mr Streeter: I thank the Minister for his answer. Can I invite him or the Secretary of State to come to Plymouth with me early in 2019 to see for themselves how digital connectivity has transformed our city? It is not just a great place to live, as it has always been, but now a great place to work and run a business. Would it not be very good for the Government to have a Government hub there?

Oliver Dowden: I know, thanks to my hon. Friend and other hon. Members, that Plymouth is a great place to work and do business. A number of potential hub locations are under active consideration. I would of course be delighted to meet a delegation from Plymouth, and I know that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster intends to visit Plymouth shortly.
Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): When the Minister is looking to relocate civil service jobs outside London, will he look at post-industrial areas, which traditionally have high levels of unemployment, as a way to stimulate the jobs market?

Oliver Dowden: That is precisely the idea behind the Places for Growth strategy, which is to ensure Government activity benefits all parts of the United Kingdom. That is why we have created hubs across the United Kingdom—for example, in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Belfast, Leeds, Birmingham and Cardiff, to name just a few.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): The Minister will be aware—at least, I hope he is aware—of the success of the Oil and Gas Authority being based in Aberdeen, as was presented in evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee yesterday by both our right hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Clean Growth and the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands from the Scottish Government. Does the Minister agree that moving civil service jobs out of London using that model has the potential to boost local economic growth across the UK?

Oliver Dowden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That forms a core part of the Government’s industrial strategy. As I have said, we have already created hubs in both Edinburgh and Glasgow, but I am open to all representations for further relocations of Government activity.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Speaker, you would be surprised if I did not mention the great benefits in this of the far north of Scotland: a lovely environment, splendid education and cheap housing and accommodation. Positioning civil service jobs in the north of Scotland, alongside Scottish civil service jobs, would be good for the relationship between Scotland and London, and it would help strengthen the Union.

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Gentleman makes the case exceptionally well. That is precisely why we are ensuring that Government jobs are located in all parts—all nations—of our United Kingdom. I know that there is already considerable space activity in his constituency.

Real Living Wage

3. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): If he will make it his policy to introduce the real living wage across all Government Departments and to seek accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): We are addressing this issue through the application of the statutory national minimum wage and the national living wage. This is based on the advice of the Low Pay Commission. From April, the national living wage will rise again—from £7.83 to £8.21 per hour—handing a full-time worker a further £690 annual pay rise.

Carol Monaghan: This Government like to talk about employment levels, but they stay silent on the fact that many people are now struggling with in-work poverty, which is rising among working parents in particular. Does this Minister believe that his kid-on living wage is more effective at tackling in-work poverty than the real living wage promoted by the Living Wage Foundation?

Oliver Dowden: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct: we do continue to talk about employment, because 2 million jobs have been created under this Government. On the point about the national living wage, we were of course the first Government actually to introduce a national living wage. The aim is that that will rise to 60% of median income by 2020, and it is actually rising faster than the real living wage.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Everyone in the country knows that the Government’s pretendy living wage is not the same as the real living wage. It pays an awful lot less, and it excludes millions of younger workers. At this season of good will, will the Government not commit to making it their policy next year to seek accreditation from the Living Wage Foundation and show leadership in the country in taking on low pay?

Oliver Dowden: I think the hon. Gentleman is a little dismissive of the national living wage, which, since it was introduced, has led to a pay rise for people on the lowest incomes of almost £3,000 a year. It is rising faster than his proposal, and it will reach 60% of median income by 2020. Post that, we will look again at further increases.

Leaving the EU: Civil Service Capacity

4. Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the capacity of the civil service to manage additional responsibilities arising from the UK leaving the EU. [908298]

14. Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the capacity of the civil service to manage additional responsibilities arising from the UK leaving the EU. [908308]

The Minister without Portfolio (Brandon Lewis): The Government are equipping themselves with the right people and the right skills for the UK to exit the European Union successfully. Almost 11,000 people are now working on EU exit-related policy and programmes across the Government, and the workforce plans will continue to be reviewed to ensure that our civil service can respond to emerging capacity and capability requirements.

Afzal Khan: The National Audit Office reports that the additional staff needed to work at UK borders after Brexit may not be in place by March 2019. Will the Minister explain why, almost 29 months since the EU referendum, the Government have not got their act together?

Brandon Lewis: All reports of the National Audit Office are obviously interesting, but I have absolute confidence in the words of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who is very confident that the Border Force will be ready—as am I, from my previous experience in that Department—for any eventuality of Brexit.
Rosie Duffield: We are hearing on the news today that the Government are preparing for every extreme eventuality and possible consequence of Brexit. Which promised or commissioned services are already not being delivered because of the thousands of civil servants transferred to EU work and preparation for the various Brexit outcomes?

Brandon Lewis: Departments are continually looking at and reviewing workforce plans, reprioritising and assessing changing needs. We have the beauty of having a fantastic civil service, with the extra funding that the Treasury has put in to make sure that we are able to get the civil service in place at this point, to continue to deliver on the important Government domestic agenda, while ensuring that we leave the EU in an orderly and sensible fashion.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): In the field of justice, we have been lucky to enjoy very good civil, mutual judicial co-operation across Europe. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, are there plans in place, and are there the civil servants, for example, to rejoin The Hague conventions in place of the regulations in Europe and so on, to ensure that we have a smooth legal transition?

Mr Speaker: There is something wrong with the microphone. The right hon. and learned Gentleman cannot be fully heard, and that is unsatisfactory, but I am sure it will be put right.

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. and learned Friend asks an important question. We are now focusing on making sure that we get the deal we want negotiated with the EU—that is our top priority—but it is right that we prepare for every eventuality. My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice is working with partners around Europe to ensure that, but the best thing we can do in this Parliament to ensure that we have a smooth and orderly Brexit, including for the justice system and security, is to support the Prime Minister’s deal when we vote on it in January.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend recall that the Prime Minister said that no deal need not be the end of the world and that Britain would be fully prepared in that eventuality? With this ramping up and extra investment, will our civil service have the resources it needs to be ready and deliver on time?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I am confident that the civil service is well equipped to deal with that, but of course our focus and our key priority is to get the right deal with the EU and one that we can pass that through this House in January.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Minister liaise with his colleagues in the Cabinet Office to ensure that civil servants, both there and in the Department for Transport, speedily come to a conclusion on air passenger duty and corporation tax, thereby giving a considerable boost to the Northern Ireland economy?

Brandon Lewis: My colleagues in the Cabinet Office and in the Department for Transport are working together to ensure that everything is as smooth as it can be. However, I would reiterate that the best way to have a smooth solution to all this is to support the withdrawal agreement that the Prime Minister is putting before this House.

Voter ID Pilots

5. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on further voter ID pilots.

10. Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Whether the Government plans to conduct further voter ID pilots; and if he will make a statement.

12. Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Whether the Government plans to conduct further voter ID pilots; and if he will make a statement.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The British public deserve to have confidence in our democracy. A diverse range of local authorities have confirmed that they will be taking part in voter ID and postal vote pilots for the 2019 local elections. The pilots will provide further insights into ensuring the security of the voting process.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful for that answer. Bishop Auckland has the lowest rate of passport ownership in the entire country. Does not the Minister understand that expensive forms of voter ID will exclude thousands of people from exercising their democratic right to vote?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I do; the design of the pilots acknowledges that and makes sure that a free-of-charge alternative will be available.

Julia Lopez: My previous experience as a Tower Hamlets councillor highlighted to me the significant vulnerability of poorer, more diverse communities to electoral fraud. How can my hon. Friend improve democratic education across all communities so that we can make the electoral system more robust?

Chloe Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing her experience and her voice to this debate; it is very important that we hear that. I also thank the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), who also represents Tower Hamlets, for his cross-party support for this policy. It shows how important that is. It is essential that electors are aware that their voice is theirs alone. That message was promoted through various channels in May this year, including work with the Electoral Commission, Crimestoppers and the police, and we will do more to spread that message.

Andrew Rosindell: Will the Minister assure the House that those who do not have the documentation she requires will not be disenfranchised by the new policy?

Chloe Smith: Yes, I am very happy to repeat that reassurance. When somebody does not have the correct form of ID, local authorities will provide an alternative method free of charge. On top of that, we are working closely with a range of charities and civil society organisations so that everyone who is registered to vote has the opportunity to do so.
Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister not aware that ID is linked to knowing where the children of our country are: are they in school; are they vulnerable? Those in her party stopped us having that identification. Many children are at risk because of their actions on ID.

Chloe Smith: The hon. Gentleman has advanced that argument over many years in many different formats. I regret to say I am not entirely clear if I follow him this morning, but I would be very happy to have a further conversation with him if there is an important point there.

13. [908307] Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Why does the Minister not, instead of wasting money on voter ID pilots, spend money on giving votes to 16-year-olds?

Mr Speaker: I say to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), if he is listening, that I think what the Minister was saying, in a very polite and roundabout way, is that she has not got the foggiest idea what he is on about. No doubt, with some clarifications, she will be perfectly clear on what he is talking about. I thought I knew what he was talking about.

Chloe Smith: Yes, Mr Speaker. To answer the hon. Member for Lanark and Hamilton East (Angela Crawley), she will know very well that the election manifesto on which this party and Government were elected excluded the only discernible effect was that several hundred thousand, is it not good enough for the country? If it is good enough for them, why is it not good enough for the country?

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): This year’s voter ID pilots cost the taxpayer £1.7 million and the only discernible effect was that several hundred people were prevented from voting. The Minister is refusing to publish details of the budget for next year’s voter ID pilots. Why is she keeping that information secret, and what has she got to hide?

Chloe Smith: There is nothing to hide. I have been extremely clear about what the costs may be. As soon as I have information about the design of the pilots, I will be happy to share it with the House. Indeed, I have undertaken to do so through the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. The hon. Gentleman needs to be concerned about how his party says one thing and does another. The Labour party uses voter ID in its own meetings. If it is good enough for them, why is it not good enough for the country?

Mr Speaker: I call Giles Watling. Not here. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”] Well, I hope the fella is not indisposed. We look forward to seeing him again. I call Michael Fabricant.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I’m here!

Mr Speaker: Nobody doubted it for a moment. We always expect the hon. Gentleman to be here, and we can spot him a mile off.

Cyber-security

7. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help improve the cyber-security of public and private sector organisations; and if he will make a statement.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Our world-leading national cyber-security strategy, which is supported by nearly £2 billion of investment, sets out measures to defend our people, businesses and infrastructure, to deter our adversaries and to develop the skills and capabilities this country needs.

Michael Fabricant: With major data breaches at the Marriott hotel group and British Airways, with which I hope to be flying tomorrow—I interrupt. Well, I hope so, anyway—what can my right hon. Friend do to ensure that private corporations maintain security for their customers?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend is spot on in his comments. That is why the National Cyber Security Centre has designed new materials aimed at members of company boards. The Cabinet Office will be launching them, along with the NCSC, in the new year.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that before the summer recess The Daily Telegraph reported that data breaches on gaining passes to Government buildings, including the Cabinet Office, were made available to the public because of the use of open shared drives that had been condemned six months previously. Can the Minister give a reassurance that that simply will not happen again?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, any breach of data security is to be regretted, and we have a system whereby we learn from those experiences. We also need to be aware that both criminal gangs and hostile state actors are always seeking innovative new ways to penetrate our defences, and the NCSC is our key source of expertise in combating that threat.

Topical Questions

T1. [908310] Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): Today, I am publishing the Government’s “State of the Estate” report, which shows that we have successfully cut the size of the Government estate by more than a third since 2010, saving £760 million in running costs. As well as saving money, we are improving the environmental performance of Government buildings, with emissions having been cut by almost 40% since 2009-10.

Paul Girvan: What engagement has the Minister had with the Northern Ireland Office over the money required to deal with the prospect of a no-deal Brexit, and what requirement has there been in respect of the allocation of moneys to the Northern Ireland Government?

Mr Lidington: Consequential sums will flow to the Northern Ireland civil service as a result of the Treasury’s announcement yesterday. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is closely involved in all Government discussions about contingency planning, and I have invited representatives of the Northern Ireland civil
service to a meeting with UK Ministers later today where they will have the opportunity to put Northern Ireland’s case directly.

Mr Lidington: I discuss these matters regularly with both the Secretaries of State my hon. Friend alluded to. I am afraid that there is no getting away from the fact that going to WTO tariffs would impose very considerable additional costs upon our dairy, meat and livestock exports, and upon our vehicle manufacturers. That is another reason why the House should back the deal on the table and not let us be sucked into the damage that a no-deal exit would bring.

Jon Trickett (Hemsworth) (Lab): Season’s greetings to you, Mr Speaker, everybody in the House and all our staff.

Yesterday’s Cabinet meeting appears to have decided to abandon all non-essential Government business and reveals an Administration in an advanced state of decay. Will the Minister now tell the House which Government functions he regards as non-essential and is now putting into deep freeze?

Mr Lidington: We have taken no decisions to put anything into deep freeze. We are engaged in prudent contingency planning so that we are prepared for all eventualities. I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman yet again has ducked the opportunity to say what the Opposition’s preferred outcome is, if they object to the deal on the table.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): The hon. Gentleman has raised the issue of Capita’s Army recruitment contract. I can tell him that we are working on a campaigning campaign, and we are in close contact with the chief executive of Capita to deal with precisely that issue.

Mr Lidington: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister could not have been clearer about both our exit from Ireland’s case directly.

Mr Lidington: I discuss these matters regularly with both the Secretaries of State my hon. Friend alluded to. I am afraid that there is no getting away from the fact that going to WTO tariffs would impose very considerable additional costs upon our dairy, meat and livestock exports, and upon our vehicle manufacturers. That is another reason why the House should back the deal on the table and not let us be sucked into the damage that a no-deal exit would bring.

Mr Lidington: I discuss these matters regularly with both the Secretaries of State my hon. Friend alluded to. I am afraid that there is no getting away from the fact that going to WTO tariffs would impose very considerable additional costs upon our dairy, meat and livestock exports, and upon our vehicle manufacturers. That is another reason why the House should back the deal on the table and not let us be sucked into the damage that a no-deal exit would bring.

Mr Lidington: I discuss these matters regularly with both the Secretaries of State my hon. Friend alluded to. I am afraid that there is no getting away from the fact that going to WTO tariffs would impose very considerable additional costs upon our dairy, meat and livestock exports, and upon our vehicle manufacturers. That is another reason why the House should back the deal on the table and not let us be sucked into the damage that a no-deal exit would bring.

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [908279] Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 19 December.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This Friday marks 30 years since the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, which resulted in the biggest loss of life from a terrorist atrocity on UK soil. I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the families and friends of the 270 people who perished, and with all those whose lives have been affected.
May I wish all Members and staff a merry Christmas and a happy new year? I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in sending our warmest Christmas wishes to all our armed forces who are stationed overseas, and I am sure that I also speak on behalf of the whole House in sending Christmas wishes to all members of the emergency services and those who will be working over Christmas. Their service and sacrifice are inspirational, and we owe them a great debt of gratitude.

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

Mike Amesbury: I wish everyone here a merry Christmas: the Prime Minister, and all other Members.

The Prime Minister: We have, in fact, been taking action in relation to leaseholds. We want to ensure that the leasehold system is transparent and fair to consumers, so that their homes truly feel like their own. In July, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government announced that no new Government funding scheme would be used to support the unjustified use of leasehold for new houses.

Our technical consultation on how to improve the leasehold market for consumers has now closed. We have received responses from nearly 1,300 people and organisations, and we are analysing those responses. We will introduce legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

Q8. [908286] Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): As you will know, Mr Speaker, the issue of British nationals living in the EU and EU nationals living in the UK is of the utmost importance to every Member of the House. Given the Prime Minister’s welcome comments on her return from Salzburg about protecting the rights of EU nationals, can she now confirm that in the event of no deal, she will now confirm that in the event of no deal—and I hope that that will not be the case—she will reach a legally binding, multilateral agreement with the EU on the issue of citizens’ rights before 29 March?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and has consistently raised and championed the needs and concerns of EU citizens here in the UK. Our withdrawal agreement does guarantee those rights, which is important not just for individuals, but for businesses. We are clear that in a no-deal scenario, EU citizens resident in the UK by 29 March 2019 will be able to stay and will be able to continue to access in-country benefits and services on broadly the same terms as now. That demonstrates our ongoing commitment; we obviously want to work with, and are strongly engaging with, our EU counterparts to urge them to make the same commitment to protect the rights of UK nationals living in the European Union. We have been clear about the rights of EU nationals here in a no-deal scenario; we want the EU to do the same for UK citizens living in the 27.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in remembering the events at Lockerbie 30 years ago. I remember the silence that fell on this entire building when the news came out of what had happened at Lockerbie. For the people of Lockerbie the trauma lives on, as it does for the families of the victims, and we should remember them today.

May I also take this opportunity, Mr Speaker, to wish you and all Members of the House and everyone around our country a very happy Christmas, particularly those who have to work over Christmas and of course our armed services who will also be on duty over the Christmas period? All the best for a peaceful and welcome 2019.

[Interuption.] I have gained acquiescence. My Christmas good wishes do extend to everyone over there on the Conservative Benches as well.

However, until then I just have to say this: the Prime Minister has plunged this country into a national crisis. She refused Parliament the right to vote on her Brexit deal. She said that she did that to seek “further assurances”; she failed. She is now claiming that she is still seeking further assurances while all the time running down the clock on the alternatives, so can the Prime Minister explain to us when the European Council will meet to approve the changes that it has already ruled out?

The Prime Minister: We are indeed still working with the European Union; we have discussions with the European Union to seek those assurances that this House wanted us to seek. May I correct the right hon. Gentleman on one point? He referenced the issue of the meaningful vote; we will have that meaningful vote here in the House. I set out earlier this week—[Interuption.] I set out—[Interuption.] There is absolutely no point in Opposition Members shouting out “When”, because I set out in the statement on Monday when that will take place.

I just say to the right hon. Gentleman that, week after week, he has stood here on this issue and talked about what he is against; he never says what he is for. If he wants to fulfil the will of the referendum—to support jobs, to end free movement, to do those trade deals, to avoid no deal—he needs to vote for this deal. He can talk all he likes about a meaningful vote; all he gives us is a meaningless position.

Jeremy Corbyn: We should have had the vote a week ago. The Prime Minister denied Parliament the opportunity to have that vote and she is still unclear as to when it will actually take place.

There are no meetings of the EU Council scheduled until 21 March, and the EU has been very clear: there are no more negotiations, clarifications or meetings. The Prime Minister will be bringing back the same deal she pulled last week; this is an intolerable situation, and she is simply playing for time.

On Monday, in response to a question from the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) on the backstop, the Prime Minister said:

“I am seeking further political and legal assurances in relation to those issues, which can be achieved in a number of ways.”—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 534.]

The Prime Minister must clearly set out now how she will achieve those legally binding assurances before the House is due to return on 7 January.
The Prime Minister: We will set out what is achieved in our EU discussions when we return in the new year, when we have had those discussions, when we bring those assurances back. The right hon. Gentleman can get as angry as he likes about this issue, but it does not hide the fact that he has no Brexit plan. I know it is Christmas, and I know that he has looked in his stocking, down the chimney and under the Christmas tree, but he still has not found a Brexit plan. He has to accept his responsibility to deliver on Brexit—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Yasin, you are normally a most composed, almost laid-back individual. You are becoming very hot-headed and I am worried, for your own sake. Calm down! Be a good fellow.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has to accept his responsibility for delivering on Brexit. There are some people who say that the Leader of the Opposition is just going through the motions, but what we saw this week is that he is not even doing that.

Jeremy Corbyn: It is the Prime Minister who is supposed to be undertaking the negotiations. It is the Prime Minister who has failed to bring an acceptable deal back. If she does not like doing it, then step aside and let somebody else do it. The reality is that she is stalling for time—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I made it clear that the Prime Minister must not be shouted down, and no one should even bother trying to shout down the Leader of the Opposition. It will not work against the Prime Minister, and it will not work against the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman. End of subject.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that the Prime Minister is stalling for time. There is still no majority in this House for her shoddy deal. It is not stoical; it is cynical. As the hon. Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah) said: “we have displacement activity designed to distract from last week’s failed renegotiation”.

The International Trade Secretary said:

“I think it is very difficult to support the deal if we don’t get changes to the backstop...I’m not even sure if the cabinet will agree for it to be put to the House of Commons”.

So can the Prime Minister give us a cast-iron guarantee that the vote in this House will not be delayed yet again?

The Prime Minister: We have been very clear about the process that we are going through and we have been very clear about when the vote will be brought back to this House. Of course the details of that debate have to be discussed in the usual channels in the usual way. The right hon. Gentleman made a response when I said that he had a responsibility to deliver on Brexit. Every Member of this House has a responsibility to deliver on Brexit, because 80% of the votes cast for Members of this House were for Members who stood on a manifesto commitment to honour the referendum and deliver on Brexit. What people will say to the right hon. Gentleman if he fails to recognise that he has a duty, as has everybody in this House, to deliver on Brexit, is that once again he has just bottled it.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister did not answer my question about a cast-iron guarantee. She is the one who has denied Parliament the right to vote on this subject, so please let us have no lectures to Parliament when it is the Prime Minister who is denying MPs the possibility of a vote. We should have had a vote a week ago, and we should now be debating practical alternatives. She is behaving in a disgraceful way that is frankly an outrage. No deal would be a disaster for our country, and no responsible Government would ever allow it. Just two weeks ago the Chancellor said that preparations for leaving with no deal “could not be done in a matter of months; they would take years in a cynical attempt to drive her deeply damaging deal through this House?

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. Gentleman does not want to see money being spent on no deal, he has an easy answer: vote for this deal.

Jeremy Corbyn: What the Prime Minister is doing is a criminal waste of money. She is recklessly running down—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. In this House of Commons, where we are supposed to try to treat each other with respect, no one, under any circumstances, is going to be shouted down, so stop the attempted shouting down, on both sides, abandon the juvenile finger-wagging, which achieves precisely nothing, and let each other be heard. It is called the assertion of democratic principle.

Jeremy Corbyn: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The Prime Minister is recklessly running down the clock, all in a shameful attempt to make her own bad deal look like the lesser of two evils. With rising crime, 20,000 fewer police on our streets, 100,000 vacancies in our national health service, and the worst performance last month of any November on record, how can the Prime Minister justify wasting that money on no deal, which cannot and will not happen?

The Prime Minister: Until a deal has been ratified, the responsible position of Government—is to put in place contingency arrangements for no deal. But I repeat that if the right hon. Gentleman wants to ensure that we leave the European Union with a deal, he has to put into practice what he is saying and actually vote for a deal. He talks yet again about the number of police officers and about money going to the police. We made extra money available to the police this year, and what did the Labour party do? It voted against it.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister should stop dithering and put it to a vote of the House. Let the House make a decision. Her friend the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) was right, was she not, when she said that the threat of no deal is “an absolute disgrace”? The Prime Minister has thrown away two years on her botched negotiations. She is now recklessly wasting £4 billion of public money. She is holding Parliament and the country to ransom. She is irresponsibly risking jobs, investment and our industries. There have been no changes, so she must put her deal to the vote. Parliament must take back control. There is no majority in this House for no deal. Is this not just a deeply cynical manoeuvre from a failing and utterly reckless Prime Minister?
The Prime Minister: I have to say that it is a bit rich for the right hon. Gentleman to stand here and talk about dithering. Let us see what the Labour party did this week. They said that they would call a vote of no confidence, and then they said that they would not. Then he said that he would, and then it was not effective—[Interruption.] I know that it is Christmas—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Members must not shout at the Prime Minister. [Interruption.] Order. Calm yourselves. Try to get into the Christmas spirit. If you cannot do that, at least listen to the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Thank you, Mr Speaker. They said they would put down a vote of no confidence, then they said they would not, then they said they would, and then they did it but it was not effective. I know it is the Christmas season and the pantomime season, but what do we see from the Labour Front Bench and the Leader of the Opposition? He is going to go on holiday, but what do we see from the Labour Front Bench and the Leader of the Opposition? He is going to put a confidence vote. Oh yes he is! [Hon. Members: “Oh no he isn’t!”] I have some news for him. I have some advice for the right hon. Gentleman: look behind you. They are not impressed, and neither is the country.

Q10. [908288] Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): May I wish the Prime Minister a well deserved Chequers chillax over Christmas before the start of the new pantomime season? On the basis that there may be £39 billion going spare in the new year, may I give her my priority Christmas list? Justice for the WASPI women: genuinely fair funding for hard-pressed schools in West Sussex; addressing the estimated £2 billion shortfall in children’s social care; and, for good measure, a vote of absolutely no confidence whatsoever in Her Majesty’s Opposition.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his good wishes. In fact, I will not be at Chequers at Christmas, but I will take his good wishes to apply wherever I am at Christmas. As he will know, we are obviously putting more money into social care and the various issues he is concerned about. I do agree that if there is any vote of no confidence in this House it should be in the Leader of the Opposition.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I associate myself with the Prime Minister’s remarks on the atrocity of Lockerbie. Mr Speaker, I wish you and everybody a merry Christmas. This is a time to be spent with friends and family, and I look forward to spending it on the Isle of Skye.

The British Chambers of Commerce, the CBI, the EEF, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Institute of Directors represent hundreds of thousands of businesses, and today they have said that their members are “watching in horror” the actions of this Government—watching in horror. This Prime Minister and the Conservative party are not fit for government. With 100 days left on the clock, this Government have failed businesses, failed Members of this House and failed citizens right across the UK. Will the Prime Minister move aside and put a vote to the people?

The Prime Minister: First, what is causing concern for businesses is the fact that Parliament has not been able to come to a decision because people—[Interruption.] It is no good Opposition Members, including SNP Members, pointing across the Chamber. They have a responsibility to deliver on Brexit for the British people as well, and it is high time they took that responsibility seriously. A deal that works for the UK, a deal that works for Scotland—that is what we are offering. It is supported by techUK, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, the Scotch Whisky Association, the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation and Oil & Gas UK. They are supporting the deal, why isn’t he?

Ian Blackford: If the Prime Minister thinks the deal is worth putting to the House, why did she pull the vote? The SNP will not stand by and watch this Prime Minister wreck our economy and rob our citizens of their rights.

Yesterday, alongside other Opposition party leaders, the SNP tabled a motion of no confidence in this shambolic Government. When the official Opposition fail to step up, the real opposition to this Tory Government will step in. The Prime Minister is now running scared and denying time for our motion for fear of the result. Is the Prime Minister so frightened of defeat that she will deny Parliament another vote?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear that Parliament will have a meaningful vote on the deal, and we have set out when that will be. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the Scottish economy. If he is concerned about the Scottish economy, why have the Scottish Government taken measures that mean people in Scotland earning £27,000 or more will be paying more tax than they would in the rest of the UK? That is not good for the Scottish economy, and it is not good for the people concerned.

Q11. [908289] Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): The Prime Minister was completely correct to castigate the Labour party for its deeply flawed plan to snatch shares in private companies. Will she join me in also condemning the South African Parliament, which is currently taking powers to seize land from its own citizens, without compensation and solely based on the colour of their skin? Not only is that wrong, but it risks turning another African country from a breadbasket into a basket case.

The Prime Minister: I recognise the concern that my hon. Friend has expressed about this issue. The question of land reform was one I raised with President Ramaphosa when I visited South Africa in August. We recognise the concern there is and the need there is for land reform, but President Ramaphosa has consistently stated that violent and illegal land seizures will not be tolerated and that the process should be orderly within South African laws and take into consideration both the social and economic impact. We want to see a process that is fair and, while it recognises the need to deliver on land reform, does that in a way that is fair to all South African citizens.

Q2. [908290] Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): It is only a few short months since the Prime Minister promised us an end to austerity. So why, at a time when demands on council resources in deprived areas such as mine are increasing and health inequalities are widening, does she believe it is right to cut the public health budget for County Durham by £19 million and increase the public health budget in affluent Surrey by £14 million?
The Prime Minister: Obviously, there are funding arrangements that apply across in terms of the decisions on these sums of money. The hon. Gentleman talks about disparities that occur. Of course funding per dwelling for the local authority in Durham is more than it is in other areas—it is more than it is in my Maidenhead constituency. So there are proper ways of looking at these issues and ensuring, as we are by putting more money into our local authorities, that the money is there for them to do the job they need to do.

Q13. [908291] Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Senior managers at Lloyds and HBOS were convicted of a disgraceful fraud against their own business customers. Now there is compelling evidence of a cover-up at the highest level, including a recent admission of the disgraceful mistreatment of a whistleblower. This week, the compensation scheme for victims was described by Jonathan Laidlaw, QC, as “partial” to the bank’s interests. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the chief executive, Antonio Horta-Osorio, should now consider his position by an independent process of arbitration?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue, and I know that he has consistently campaigned on it. I understand that he raised it yesterday in a debate in Westminster Hall. As he said in his question, the events at HBOS Reading—at that branch—constituted criminal activity, and it is right that those responsible were brought to justice. Decisions about whether to launch financial services conduct investigations are the responsibility of the Financial Conduct Authority, as the independent regulator for the sector. I understand that it is currently conducting two investigations into the events at HBOS Reading, including into the bank’s communications with regulators following the discovery of the misconduct. Obviously, we look forward to the conclusions of those investigations. I know that my hon. Friend will continue to champion the needs and concerns of all those who found themselves recipients and victims of what was identified as criminal activity.

Q3. [908281] John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): For almost 400 years, this country, almost uniquely in the world, has been a place of safety and security, and a place where Jewish communities have thrived. In 2018, many in the Jewish community are questioning whether that will be the case into the future. A disturbingly large number of young Jewish people are questioning whether they should remain in this country. Does the Prime Minister agree that 2019 has to be a year when we all—every one of us—to stand up as we go into the new year and say that 2019 will be the year when we stand up and say there is no place for antisemitism or racial hatred in our society.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Most Members of this House, on both sides, are likely to spend much of the recess working, as I know my right hon. Friend herself will. Given the cost of staffing and security, can my right hon. Friend think of any reason at all, other than grandstanding, for the early recall of Parliament? Will she, with our good wishes, continue her endeavours to seek a solution to what we all know is a very intractable problem?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important that we are able to conduct the discussions that are taking place with the European Union. We have been clear that we will bring the meaningful vote back to the House, and it is right that we have set out the timing on which that will be done. I thank my hon. Friend for pointing out that when Members of this House leave Parliament as we go into recess, they do not just go away: they go to their constituencies and work in their constituencies and for their constituents. That is all too frequently forgotten by many, so I thank my hon. Friend for raising it and reminding us of it.

Q4. [908282] Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Homelessness in the UK is now a national emergency and a national disgrace. How can it be, in a country of our resources, our talents and our wealth, that this year 320,000 British people have been classed as being homeless? Don’t listen to your Ministers, Prime Minister; you only need to go to any British city centre this Christmas to see just how bad this problem has become since 2010. Whatever the Government think they are doing, it is not enough. Prime Minister, please, will you try to do better next year?

The Prime Minister: First, in the way that the hon. Gentleman put his question he is confusing or putting together homelessness and rough sleeping. These are different issues. Nobody should have to sleep rough on the streets of this country, which is why we are taking action against it. The hon. Gentleman raises the wider issue of homelessness. Why is it that we have this wider issue? It is because Governments, year after year, failed to build enough homes in this country. We need to ensure that we are building those homes. That is what this Government are doing. Last year we saw the number of homes being built at the highest level for any but one of the last 31 years. If the hon. Gentleman wants to ensure that there is a variety of housing available to people in this country, it is this Government who have ensured that councils can borrow more to build more houses, and what did he and the Labour party do? They voted against it.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Twelve young people die each week in this country from sudden cardiac arrest, and that figure could be reduced significantly by the availability of more defibrillators. Will the Prime Minister therefore support my ten-minute rule Bill,
which I will present to Parliament this afternoon, and which will require the mandatory installation of defibrillators in all schools, leisure centres and public buildings so that we can end this needless loss of life?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this issue, which we take extremely seriously. We are certainly committed to encouraging all schools to acquire defibrillators as part of their first aid equipment. The Department for Education has been working with the NHS to make these life-saving devices more affordable. They have also become easier to use in recent times. I pay tribute not only to my hon. Friend for raising this issue, but to those many people up and down the country who are campaigning and raising funds to ensure that there are defibrillators not just in schools but in other places, such as outside the hall in Holyport in my constituency. The defibrillator there was paid for by money raised by people in that village. We should commend such people for what they are doing, and we will continue to work to ensure that defibrillators are available.

Q5. [908283] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The Office for National Statistics excess winter mortality figures show that, in our country over the past 10 years, 313,000 people have died because of the cold. Last winter, 50,000 died, the highest number of winter casualties since 1976. It is a shameful indictment of our ability as a country to protect our most elderly and vulnerable residents, so may I ask the Prime Minister to say specifically what she will do this winter to prevent thousands of people from dying needlessly?

The Prime Minister: There are many actions that the Government are taking in relation to the wider issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised about people saving lives over the winter—action is being taken in the NHS and elsewhere. Of course, for people to be able to heat their homes and to have confidence that they can afford to heat their homes, it is important that we help those who find themselves stuck on tariffs that are not right for them—that are higher than they should be. That is why our energy price cap is an important step in this. It will help 11 million households. On average, £76 a year will be saved and for some £130.

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that demand for special educational needs provision is increasing throughout the country and that resources are thinly spread. Will she undertake in 2019 to make it an even higher priority for our Government to provide generous support for these very special children?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. He is absolutely right. The need to ensure that we are providing for children with special educational needs is very important. We are already seeing £6 billion this year going towards children with complex special educational needs; that is the highest level on record. We are also investing £265 million through to 2021 to create new school places and improve the existing facilities for children with special educational needs and those with disabilities. But it is also about the programme we have with our free schools: 34 special schools have opened so far with a further 55 in the pipeline. That is providing for children with special educational needs and we will continue to do so.

Q6. [908284] Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Yesterday, within hours of the Prime Minister greenlighting the no-deal preparations, a constituent contacted me to say that he had been sent a redundancy notice by his work directly as a result of the chaos that this will cause. Her own figures show that any Brexit deal will leave us poorer, but no deal means a £24 billion hit to our public finances. [Interruption.] The Chancellor barracks—these are his own figures. Can the Prime Minister tell my now unemployed constituent what public services she is going to cut, or what taxes she is planning to raise to deal with that hole? Or is she just going to leave it to one of her successors to deal with these problems?

The Prime Minister: While the Government are making contingency arrangements for no deal, of course, what they are working for is to get the agreement on the deal that has been negotiated with the European Union such that we leave with a good deal for the United Kingdom that ensures that jobs are increased in this country, as they have been over the last eight years under a Conservative Government.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking all NHS, social care and emergency services staff who will be working over Christmas and the new year? Imagine how many more of them could be employed if we were not haemorrhaging billions preparing for a disastrous no deal. Could the Prime Minister end the uncertainty by ruling out no deal and will she also end the uncertainty please by publishing the long-term 10-year plan for the NHS before we break for Christmas?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend and indeed a number of others have raised this question of no deal and not wanting to have no deal. As I said earlier in answer to questions, there is a simple way to ensure that we do not leave with no deal, and that is to back the deal.

Q7. [908285] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): Motor neurone disease is terminal but, under this Government, people who are diagnosed with this dreadful disease have to prove that they have a reasonable expectation of death within six months, or go through a process of assessment. Will the Prime Minister show some empathy, show some compassion and take action with her new Secretary of State to end this dreadful state of affairs which she is presiding over?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue about people with motor neurone disease. I note his point and will inquire about these issues with the Department for Work and Pensions. I will look into the issue and respond to the hon. Gentleman in writing.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): The Prime Minister is sending Parliament off for a two-week break at the very moment that we have a Brexit crisis and no decisions. Our communities want us here, representing them in Parliament. If we are not even back until 7 January,
how can she possibly say that we are doing our job? Is not the message to the British people, “Crisis? What crisis?”

The Prime Minister: We are in a very simple situation, as I am sure my right hon. Friend understands. Members across the House raised some concerns specifically in relation to the Northern Ireland backstop in the withdrawal agreement. We are having further discussions with the European Union on that matter to achieve the political and legal assurances that will assuage those concerns, and then we will bring the vote back to this House.

Q9. [908287] Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): As the Home Secretary will not answer a rather straightforward question, will the Prime Minister tell us whether it is still her intention that her Government will reduce immigration to the tens of thousands? Yes or no?

The Prime Minister: Yes. [Interuption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have a bit of hush for a midlands Dame—Dame Caroline Spelman.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): The Prime Minister was sent a letter on a cross-party basis from those of us who have manufacturing workers and those who support them in our constituencies, who are deeply concerned about the impact of Brexit on their jobs. Does she agree that the best way to avoid the unnecessary economic damage of leaving with no deal is to leave with a deal and protect those jobs?

The Prime Minister: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The manufacturing industry has been clear with us that it wants the country to leave the European Union with a deal that helps to protect those jobs. That is exactly what we want to do, and that is the decision that Parliament will be faced with when we bring the meaningful vote back.

Q12. [908290] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Almost 1,000 Nottingham South residents have already responded to my Brexit survey. Only 7% back the Prime Minister’s deal and more than three quarters want to vote on Brexit if MPs cannot agree. She will not let Parliament have a vote and she opposes letting the people have a vote. Are not her attempts to dodge and delay simply costly and reckless?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is wrong. She says that I will not let Parliament have a vote; Parliament will have a vote when we have conducted those further discussions with the EU.

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am afraid that the Prime Minister is wrong when she says that the choice that will eventually face this House is the choice between her deal and no deal. I gently say that no responsible Conservative Prime Minister—we are, after all, the party of business—would be so reckless as to take us out of the European Union without a deal. Will the Prime Minister now commit to this—[Interuption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Some junior Minister presumes to try to shout down the right hon. Lady. Not only unethical, Mr Opperman, but always—everywhere, without exception—doomed to fail.

Anna Soubry: It is a little dangerous as well, if I may say so.

When the Prime Minister’s deal fails, as we all know it will, will she then commit to allowing this House to consider all the various options that exist, other than her deal, by way of proper meaningful votes, as a matter of urgency, given that the clock is ticking down?

The Prime Minister: The House will be having the meaningful vote that it asked for. That meaningful vote will be on the deal that has been agreed and negotiated with the European Union, subject to the further work that is being undertaken in relation to the assurances. I recognise the concern about no deal raised by my right hon. Friend and other Members. I come back to the point that the only way to ensure that we do not leave with no deal is to ensure that we leave with a deal.

Q14. [908292] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Will the Prime Minister quickly intervene to overcome the difficulties at the Home Office which are obstructing the Home Secretary’s ability to provide the assurances that she requires, so that she can then implement the changes in the White Paper about to be published aims to do. Can the
Prime Minister identify a single tangible benefit that my constituents will notice that could possibly compensate for lower earnings, lower standards of living and desperate staff shortages in our public services?

The Prime Minister: I suggest to the hon. Gentleman that he looks at previous research that has been done by the Migration Advisory Committee that shows that in certain economic circumstances the numbers of people coming to the United Kingdom from the European Union, and overall migration into the United Kingdom, did have an effect on people here already resident in the United Kingdom and their ability to get into the jobs market.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): Mr Speaker, you have helpfully circulated an update on behaviour in this place. This year, when we have been celebrating 100 years of women getting the vote, does my right hon. Friend think it is appropriate language to call people stupid women in this Chamber?

The Prime Minister: I think that everybody in this House, particularly on the 100th anniversary of women getting the vote, should be aiming to encourage women to come into this Chamber and to stand in this Chamber, and should therefore use appropriate language in this Chamber when they are referring to female Members.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I join with others in wishing everybody a very happy Christmas and a peaceful new year? As the Prime Minister ponders over Christmas what might be done to get her withdrawal agreement through this House, can I urge her to consider the necessary changes that need to be made—not just assurances—in order to get somewhere with any realistic prospect of actually winning that vote?

The Prime Minister: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I say that I would like to give him the reassurance that we will of course look at all the options that are available for dealing with the issues that have been raised.
Points of Order

12.48 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: No, points of order come after statements, as the right hon. Gentleman is well aware. [Interjection.] Order. [Interjection.] Calm down! I do not need any advice from the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). I understand that the point of order flows from the exchanges, and in those circumstances, as I have done on previous occasions, I will take the point of order—[Interjection.] No, I am taking the point of order from the right hon. Gentleman. I will be the judge of these matters.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Mr Speaker, you may not have seen it, but during the exchanges in Prime Minister’s questions, the Leader of the Opposition sat down, he muttered words that were quite clearly visible, accusing the Prime Minister of being a “stupid woman”. [Hon. Members: “Shame!”] Bearing in mind the booklet that you issued this week, and the words that the Leader of the Opposition said last September, would it not be appropriate for him to come back to the Chamber and apologise?

Mr Speaker: I am pleased to respond to the right hon. Gentleman’s point of order. As he rightly surmised at the start of it, I saw no such thing. I am not making an allegation, and I am not denying or seeking to refute that of the right hon. Gentleman. I cannot be expected to pronounce upon that which I did not see, which I did not hear and which was not witnessed by my advisers. [Interjection.] Order. I do not need any advice on how to respond to a point of order from the right hon. Gentleman, which is what I am doing.

What I say in response, with all courtesy to the right hon. Gentleman, who is perfectly entitled to have raised that point of order, is that it is incumbent upon all Members of this House to operate in accordance with its best conventions and to follow the conventions and courtesies. If a Member has failed to do so, that Member has a responsibility to apologise. The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that. What he cannot, and I am sure does not, expect me to do is pronounce a verdict in a circumstance which I did not witness, in terms of either seeing anything or hearing anything, and neither did my advisers. I will leave it there. It is perfectly proper that the right hon. Gentleman raised the matter. I have responded to it, and there can be no “further to that point of order,” because I have—[Interjection.] Order.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: There can be no “further to that point of order” on that matter, for the simple reason—as the right hon. Gentleman acknowledged, with his nod of assent—that he has raised it with me, and I have responded to it.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it on an unrelated matter?

Andrea Leadsom: No, it is on this.

Mr Speaker: No. [Interjection.] I am not going to take lectures from Members. It is normal convention in this place and part of the conventions and courtesies of this House that when a matter has been addressed, we do not have repeat points of order on exactly the same—[Interjection.] Order. We do not have repeat points of order on exactly the same matter. [Interjection.] Order. I am perfectly prepared to take a point of order on the matter from the Leader of the House. We have heavy business today, some of which is Government statements, and with which we will in due course—preferably reasonably soon—need to proceed. I will happily take the right hon. Lady’s point of order.

Andrea Leadsom: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I would just like to ask, after your finding that individuals who are found to have made unwelcome remarks should apologise, why it is that when an Opposition Member found that you had called me a “stupid woman”, you did not apologise in this Chamber.

Mr Speaker: No, no. [Interjection.] I will deal with the point. [Interjection.] I dealt with that matter months ago in remarks that I made to the House of Commons, to which the right hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that if I was found to have made unwelcome remarks should apologise, why it is that when an Opposition Member found that you had called me a “stupid woman”, you did not apologise in this Chamber.

Andrea Leadsom: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. With great respect to you, I have to say this. If it was one of my male colleagues on the Government Benches who had used that expression against a woman on the Opposition Front Bench, you would take action immediately. This is not acceptable. Please will you deal with it as you often do—in a fair way—but also from the point of view of women in this House, who are fed up with being abused by men over decades?

Mr Speaker: I am very happy to deal with it. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that if I witnessed an instance of the kind that has been alleged, I would deprecate it unreservedly. [Interjection.] Order. I am very happy to deal with it. The right hon. Lady is absolutely right to say that if I witnessed an instance of the kind that has been alleged, I would deprecate it unreservedly. [Interjection.] It is no good people shaking their heads. I received assent to the proposition, which I think would command widespread assent, simply and logically that I cannot be expected to deprecate the behaviour of an individual that I did not witness. [Interjection.] Order. If the right hon. Lady—[Interjection.] Order. If the right hon. Lady. The right hon. Lady is asking me whether I deprecate without reservation the use of such language, yes, obviously I do, without any hesitation, but I cannot be expected to pronounce judgment in a particular case on a given individual when I was not privy to the circumstances. If she is asking me whether that language is unacceptable, it is.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I can see Members’ phones—clearly the evidence exists. If we bring it to you within the next two minutes, will you then take action? Again, I make the point that if a male on this side of the House had said this about a woman on the other side, I think you would.
Mr Speaker: The answer is—forgive me—that it is incumbent upon a Member who has erred and who has used inappropriate language and behaved improperly to come to the House—[Interruption.] Order. [Interruption.] It is incumbent upon that person to recognise the misconduct and to apologise for it. [Interruption.] Order. If Members produce what they regard as evidence, of course it is reasonable—[Interruption.] If Members produce what they regard as evidence—[Interruption.] I am in the middle of responding.

James Cleverly (Brantree) (Con): Our word is evidence!

Mr Speaker: I ask the hon. Member for Brantree (James Cleverly) to have the courtesy to allow me to respond to the right hon. Lady’s point of order. If evidence is produced, it will be considered, and I will take professional advice, as fair-minded people would expect me to do.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Could you confirm that it is not acceptable parliamentary language to call a woman a “stupid woman” in this House? As regards the point of order from the Leader of the House, may I add the words “Me too”?

Mr Speaker: The answer is that I have already made the response to that point perfectly clear. Forgive me—I treat the hon. Lady with courtesy and respect, and she is perfectly entitled to raise a point of order, but of that point I have already treated.

James Cleverly: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. In the leaflet you distributed, you make the point, rightly, that we are all honourable Members. Our word is therefore evidence. I saw it, Sir—I saw him say it.

Mr Speaker: All—[Interruption.] Order. [Interruption.] Order. I am not seeking to refute what the hon. Gentleman is saying—[Interruption.] Order. I am simply saying I did not witness it. The Clerk of the House and the other Clerks at the Table did not witness it—[Interruption.] Order. I am sorry, I cannot be expected immediately—[Interruption.] Order. It is no good somebody waving something at me. I cannot be expected immediately to pronounce guilt or innocence. [Interruption.] No, no I cannot be expected—[Interruption.] What I reiterate to the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] Order. I will deal with it in a moment. What I reiterate to the hon. Gentleman is that Members are responsible for their own conduct and should apologise if they have committed a misdemeanour—[Interruption.] It is no good a Member standing by the Chair and trying to show me something. I would say—[Interruption.] What I say to the hon. Gentleman—[Interruption.] Order. What I say to the hon. Gentleman is that the Leader of the Opposition will have heard of the allegations that have been made—[Interruption.] He will have heard the allegations—[Interruption.] Order. If the right hon. Gentleman, in the light of those, chose to come to the House and to respond, I am sure that would be appreciated by the House.

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand the observations made by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), and I hope I bow to no one in my wish to see the courtesies of this House observed, but do you believe that it is in order for what appears to be becoming almost an orchestrated riot to take place? [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. No, I am sorry. Hon. and—[Interruption.] Order. Hon. and right hon. Members have raised points of order, and they have been heard and they have been answered. The notion that the right hon. Lady stands to raise a point of order and is then shouted down—[Interruption.] Don’t “no” to me. That is exactly what an attempt was being made to achieve and it is not going to work.

Margaret Beckett: Certainly, Mr Speaker, it does seem to me—and I have been in this House for some many years—that an attempt is presently being made to shout you down. There is much serious business before this House and I would be astonished if a single one of our constituents does not view these scenes with utter contempt.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she has said.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Yes, of course I will come to the other Members.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It is clear that this has raised some significant upset, certainly on the Government side and, I suspect, among some women—[Interruption.] The issue of the Leader of the Opposition being alleged to have called someone a “stupid woman”—to have called the Prime Minister of our country a “stupid woman”—has clearly caused high feeling. It is also clear that many hon. and right hon. Members have evidence to show you. I am really grateful that you are willing to look at that and then to take the advice that you need before coming back to the House. Can I ask within what timeframe you expect to be able to do so?

Mr Speaker: Yes, [Interruption.] Order. That is a very reasonable point of order. The answer is that I reiterate that I am happy to look at that evidence, if that evidence exists.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Oh, it does.

Mr Speaker: I do not need the hon. Gentleman to chunter—[Interruption.] I do not need the intervention of the hon. Gentleman, which does not advance matters. What I say to the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), with courtesy, is that I have heard her point of order. I am willing to consider that evidence and I would come back on the matter, as advised by the Clerk, after the two statements to the House. That seems perfectly reasonable. We have two statements to follow. If the evidence exists, it can be looked at, and a response can be provided and we can take the matter from there, but it can perfectly reasonably wait and should sensibly do so until the two statements have been delivered to the House and questioning has taken place on them.
Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for looking at the evidence—I think they call it VAR in football—but when you come back, would it be possible for the House authorities to have contacted the office of the Leader of the Opposition to make sure that he is present to hear your ruling?

Mr Speaker: Let us wait to see. If I have a ruling, it would be a great courtesy if the Leader of the Opposition were here, and I very much hope that he will be. I note what the right hon. and learned Gentleman has said.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Calling anybody a “stupid woman” is not acceptable. Can I endorse the words of the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson)—that also what is important, if we want to encourage a wide range of people to get involved in politics, is that we have cool heads, accessible processes and an honest way of proceeding? Right now, the most important thing for this House is to be able to go away and look at the evidence and get on with doing our job, so Mr Speaker, please can you tell us how we move on to the next bit of business?

Mr Speaker: The answer is—[Interruption] / Order. I do not need the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) continually ranting—[Interruption] / Order. Don’t argue the toss with me, Mr Hoare. I will call the points of order when I am—[Interruption] / I will call them when I am ready. What I say to the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is that the best way in which to proceed is to move to the statements, and I will treat of further points of order in the circumstances. Do not forget, I was not aware of this alleged evidence, and it has been brought to light by points of order, but the sooner the points of order come to an end, the sooner we can proceed with the next business of the House of Commons.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. You used the word—perfectly properly—“evidence” on a number of occasions. Certainly, I think a number of us will have seen clips—on a variety of Twitter feeds—and anybody who has a basic lip-reading skill will understand what the Labour leader had to say about my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Sir, will you undertake to take into evidence things which people have tweeted out to show that—[Interruption] /

Mr Speaker: I will certainly take—[Interruption] / No, no, I have got the point.

Simon Hoare: And to show—

Mr Speaker: Come on, quickly.

Simon Hoare: And indeed to take the television footage taken by the officials of this place.

Mr Speaker: Yes. I do not honestly think that added much, frankly. I think the commitment was pretty clear, but yes, I am very happy to provide the hon. Gentleman with the assurance that he seeks.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I have the utmost respect for your position and the Chair. If you look at what has been put forward in evidence and you come back with a judgment, would you please call the Leader of the Opposition back to the Chamber so that we can hear the full evidence of what has been put forward?

Mr Speaker: I think I rather indicated that I expected that to happen, so if the hon. Gentleman seeks the assurance that I would expect the Leader of the Opposition to be here, the answer is yes.

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

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I am saving the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford up—it would be a pity to squander him.

Mr Seely: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. When you have seen the video replay—and thank God for video replays—and you decide to come back to the House, do you have the power to call the Leader of the Opposition back to make sure that he is here to face us?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to the hon. Gentleman is that, technically, I do not have that power, but I think it reasonable to suppose in the circumstances that the Leader of the Opposition would return to the Chamber. I think that is an entirely reasonable assumption—[Interruption] / It is not for me to get into that until the evidence has been assessed, but it is reasonable to suppose that the right hon. Gentleman would return to the Chamber.

Mr Francois: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. For the avoidance of doubt, I am not taking part in an “orchestrated riot”, but I would like politely to ask a question. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald) was quite right that in these circumstances you should consult the video referee, and I think you will find that the video evidence is overwhelming. Earlier, the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) made a very powerful point at Prime Minister’s questions about antisemitism, and there was a great “Hear, hear!” around the Chamber. None of us in any part of the House would countenance an antisemitic statement—particularly made at the Dispatch Box of the Commons. If we are not going to have antisemitic statements, we cannot have misogynistic statements either.

Mr Speaker: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman 100%. I agree with him—for the avoidance of doubt and benefiting by repetition—100%.

If we have concluded the points of order, of which it is pretty clear that I have attempted to treat in detail, we come now to the first of the two ministerial statements.
Future Immigration

1.9 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): With permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the UK’s future border and immigration system after we leave the EU.

We all heard the public’s concerns about immigration in the run-up to the EU referendum. These were concerns held by many voters on both sides of the debate. The result of that referendum was clear: the UK will be leaving the European Union on the 29 March 2019. This means we can end freedom of movement so that, for the first time for more than 40 years, we will be able to say who can and who cannot come into this country.

This is an historic moment, but let us be clear. The United Kingdom has a proud history of being an open and welcoming nation, and this will not change. As the son of immigrant parents, I know full well the contribution they, like many other migrants, made to the community I grew up in. We recognise and value the contribution of immigration and the contribution it has made to our society, our culture, our economy and our communities, and this cannot be over-stressed. For example, there is how it has helped to deliver vital public services. It has brought new perspectives, expertise and knowledge, stimulating growth and making us all the more the tolerant, outward-looking nation that we are today.

Britain is going to stay open for business. We will continue to welcome talented migrants from every corner of the globe. We have been clear in saying to the 3 million EU nationals already here, “We value hugely the contribution that you have made to this country. Deal or no deal, we want you to stay, and we will protect your rights.” The future system is about making sure immigration works in the best interests of the UK. We are absolutely not closing our doors. We are simply making sure immigration works in the best interests of the UK. We will introduce the immigration and social security system after we leave the EU.

We all heard the public’s concerns about immigration in the run-up to the EU referendum. These were concerns held by many voters on both sides of the debate. The result of that referendum was clear: the UK will be leaving the European Union on the 29 March 2019. This means we can end freedom of movement so that, for the first time for more than 40 years, we will be able to say who can and who cannot come into this country.

This is an historic moment, but let us be clear. The United Kingdom has a proud history of being an open and welcoming nation, and this will not change. As the son of immigrant parents, I know full well the contribution they, like many other migrants, made to the community I grew up in. We recognise and value the contribution of immigration and the contribution it has made to our society, our culture, our economy and our communities, and this cannot be over-stressed. For example, there is how it has helped to deliver vital public services. It has brought new perspectives, expertise and knowledge, stimulating growth and making us all the more the tolerant, outward-looking nation that we are today.

Britain is going to stay open for business. We will continue to welcome talented migrants from every corner of the globe. We have been clear in saying to the 3 million EU nationals already here, “We value hugely the contribution that you have made to this country. Deal or no deal, we want you to stay, and we will protect your rights.” The future system is about making sure immigration works in the best interests of the UK. We are absolutely not closing our doors. We are simply making sure that we have control over who comes through them, ensuring, as we committed to do in our manifesto, that we are able to bring annual net migration down to more sustainable levels.

Today, we have published a White Paper setting out the Government’s proposals for doing this through a single, skills-based immigration system that will seize the unique opportunities enabled by the end of free movement. Copies are available for right hon. and hon. Members in the Vote Office. I would like to highlight to the House the key proposals and principles in it.

First, free movement will come to an end. Tomorrow, we will introduce the immigration and social security co-ordination (EU withdrawal) Bill to implement this. It will make European economic area and Swiss nationals and their family members subject to UK immigration control, and it will protect the status of Irish nationals. This means that in the future everyone other than British and Irish citizens will need to get UK permission before they can come here.

Secondly, there will be a single immigration system for all nationalities. The existing automatic preference for EU citizens will end. This approach will give everyone the same chance, regardless of where they are from—levelling the playing field to welcome the most talented workers from anywhere in the world.

Thirdly, this will be a skills-based system, giving priority to those with the skills we need. We are taking this approach to ensure that we can attract the brightest and the best people to the UK—those who will help our economy flourish. This follows advice that has been commissioned by the Government from the independent Migration Advisory Committee on the impact of European migration on the UK economy and society. We believe this is fair, and it will help drive up wages and productivity across our economy.

Following these three principles, we are acting to make the future immigration system work for those coming to our country, for businesses, for our public services and for the UK as a whole. Our approach will maintain protections for British workers while cutting bureaucracy. Fundamental to this will be a new route for skilled workers to ensure that employers can access the talent that they need to compete on the world stage. There will be no cap on numbers and no requirement for the highest skilled workers to undertake a resident labour market test, and there will be a minimum salary threshold.

We are also creating a time-limited short-term workers route to ensure businesses have the staff that they need to fill jobs, as they adapt to a new immigration system. We will ask the MAC to keep this scheme under review, so that it ensures a smooth transition. This route will be open to seasonal and low-skilled workers, along with high-skilled workers who need to come to the UK for longer than the current business visitor visa rules allow. Those who arrive under this scheme will have no rights to access public funds, to settle or to bring in dependants. The White Paper sets out our initial proposals to allow these short-term workers to come to the UK for 12 months at a time, followed by a year-long cooling-off period to prevent long-term working. We will be engaging extensively with businesses and with stakeholders on the length of the stay and the cooling-off period to make sure that we get this right.

These proposals will give protection to British workers, but we have recognised that immigration alone cannot be the solution, so we will continue as a Government, working in partnership with business, to invest in and to improve the productivity and skills of the UK workforce.

Our world-class universities will also benefit from the proposed new system. There will be no limits on the number of international students who will come here, and we continue to encourage them to come and study here. We will make it easier for graduates to stay and to work. This will widen the talent pool for businesses and boost economic growth.

Our plans are about opening Britain up for business, rather than creating new red tape. The future immigration system will be quick and easy to use. We will introduce a streamlined application process for those who are visiting, coming to work or coming to study, and this will use the very latest technology. This will improve the experience of visitors and travellers have when they are crossing the border. We will also make it possible for more people to use e-gates. At the same time, we will improve security at the border by introducing an electronic travel authorisation scheme and phasing out the use of insecure national identity cards.

We are proposing a single, skills-based immigration system that will be fit for the future—one that is flexible and responsive to the needs of our country. This new system will be fit for the future—one that is flexible and responsive to the needs of our country. This new system will be the solution, so we will continue as a Government, to work in partnership with business, to invest in and to improve the productivity and skills of the UK workforce.

These proposals will give protection to British workers, but we have recognised that immigration alone cannot be the solution, so we will continue as a Government, working in partnership with business, to invest in and to improve the productivity and skills of the UK workforce.

Our world-class universities will also benefit from the proposed new system. There will be no limits on the number of international students who will come here, and we continue to encourage them to come and study here. We will make it easier for graduates to stay and to work. This will widen the talent pool for businesses and boost economic growth.

Our plans are about opening Britain up for business, rather than creating new red tape. The future immigration system will be quick and easy to use. We will introduce a streamlined application process for those who are visiting, coming to work or coming to study, and this will use the very latest technology. This will improve the experience of visitors and travellers have when they are crossing the border. We will also make it possible for more people to use e-gates. At the same time, we will improve security at the border by introducing an electronic travel authorisation scheme and phasing out the use of insecure national identity cards.

We are proposing a single, skills-based immigration system that will be fit for the future—one that is flexible and responsive to the needs of our country. This new system will be the solution, so we will continue as a Government, to work in partnership with business, to invest in and to improve the productivity and skills of the UK workforce.

These proposals will give protection to British workers, but we have recognised that immigration alone cannot be the solution, so we will continue as a Government, working in partnership with business, to invest in and to improve the productivity and skills of the UK workforce.

Our world-class universities will also benefit from the proposed new system. There will be no limits on the number of international students who will come here, and we continue to encourage them to come and study here. We will make it easier for graduates to stay and to work. This will widen the talent pool for businesses and boost economic growth.

Our plans are about opening Britain up for business, rather than creating new red tape. The future immigration system will be quick and easy to use. We will introduce a streamlined application process for those who are visiting, coming to work or coming to study, and this will use the very latest technology. This will improve the experience of visitors and travellers have when they are crossing the border. We will also make it possible for more people to use e-gates. At the same time, we will improve security at the border by introducing an electronic travel authorisation scheme and phasing out the use of insecure national identity cards.

We are proposing a single, skills-based immigration system that will be fit for the future—one that is flexible and responsive to the needs of our country. This new system will be the solution, so we will continue as a Government, to work in partnership with business, to invest in and to improve the productivity and skills of the UK workforce.

These proposals will give protection to British workers, but we have recognised that immigration alone cannot be the solution, so we will continue as a Government, working in partnership with business, to invest in and to improve the productivity and skills of the UK workforce.

Our world-class universities will also benefit from the proposed new system. There will be no limits on the number of international students who will come here, and we continue to encourage them to come and study here. We will make it easier for graduates to stay and to work. This will widen the talent pool for businesses and boost economic growth.

Our plans are about opening Britain up for business, rather than creating new red tape. The future immigration system will be quick and easy to use. We will introduce a streamlined application process for those who are visiting, coming to work or coming to study, and this will use the very latest technology. This will improve the experience of visitors and travellers have when they are crossing the border. We will also make it possible for more people to use e-gates. At the same time, we will improve security at the border by introducing an electronic travel authorisation scheme and phasing out the use of insecure national identity cards.
means that individuals do not need to make immediate changes and that businesses do not need to rush through plans based on guesswork about the future system.

The immigration White Paper outlines the proposals for the biggest change to our immigration system in a generation. However, it is important to note that it is not the final word; rather, it is the starting point of a national conversation on a future immigration system. I am pleased to announce that the Government will be launching a year-long programme of engagement across the UK to ensure that a wide range of views are heard.

I am confident all the measures that have been outlined today will ensure that the UK continues to flourish outside the EU; that the future immigration system is geared towards controlling who can come here and for what purpose, reducing net migration, while ensuring the brightest and the best can work and study here; and that it will boost our economy and benefit the British people. We are building a fair and sustainable immigration system that answers the concerns people have rightly had about free movement—an immigration system that is designed in Britain, made in Britain and serves our national interest. I commend this statement to the House.

1.18 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for early sight of the statement.

As the whole House knows, since the 2016 referendum politics has been convulsed by the debate about Brexit, and we have seen ever more heightened convulsions in recent days. At the heart of the debate, as far as many of our constituents are concerned, have been migration issues. That is why it is a disgrace that it has taken the Government so long to produce this long-promised White Paper. It is almost a year late, and this is entirely because of internal disputes in the Cabinet.

The whole House knows that when we leave the single market, freedom of movement falls. The Labour party set that out in our manifesto, and it remains our position. Then there will be an urgent need to fashion a new and, we hope, fairer immigration system, but the important thing is that, going forward, we do not base the new immigration system on some of the myths of the past. The whole House heard the Prime Minister say that the Government were still committed to reducing migration to tens of thousands—a target that has never been met, will never be met, and is a pretext for anti-immigrant measures—but many Members will have heard the Home Secretary on the radio today, repeatedly refusing to commit himself to the tens of thousands target. So which is it? Where do the Government stand? Will they continue with a bogus and unachievable target, or will they genuinely try to shape an immigration system that meets the needs of the society?

If the Home Secretary is allowed to abandon the commitment to a formal target in the tens of thousands, that would be welcome. That target was a purely political device, designed to stress the Government’s intent to crack down on immigration when the Conservatives felt under pressure from UKIP, but the House will wait to see what his attitude to targets means in practice. The danger is that he will abandon formal adherence to targets in principle, but that the Home Office—particularly hearing, as it will have done, what the Prime Minister has to say—will continue to function in the same way, with all the distortions, all the unfairness and all the inefficiencies that arbitrary targets lead to.

I support a single immigration system for all nationalities. To my certain knowledge, nothing drove pro-leave sentiment among voters of Commonwealth origin more than the sense that they were disadvantaged in relation to immigration compared with EU nationals. So, if Brexit produces nothing else, it ought to produce a system that moves away from that unfairness. We should be a country that treats the doctor from Poland in the same way as a doctor from Pakistan.

Is the Home Secretary aware of the concern that the uncertainty about the Government’s intentions and the delays in producing a White Paper have produced among EU citizens, their friends, their families and their employers? Is he able to tell us when we will know what the minimum salary threshold will be? There is much concern that the minimum salary threshold will be at £30,000, which would actually rule out healthcare workers, social care workers and technicians, and be very damaging to both the private and public sector. When will we know what that threshold will be?

As for the arrangement that the Home Secretary set out in the statement about time-limited temporary short-term workers who have no rights to access public funds, settle or bring dependants—they would come for 12 months at a time, followed by a year-long cooling-off period—that might suit some sectors, notably agriculture, but it is a very alarming prospect for most employers because it will not allow them to establish the continuity of employment that is vital for delivering their services, whether in the private or the public sector.

Does the Home Secretary really think that the Home Office has the capacity to change its established ways of working and its unofficial targets, which it was clearly working towards and helped contribute to the Windrush scandal? Does he accept that on immigration, he cannot have it both ways? He cannot talk about an outward-looking, global Britain and meeting the needs of society and employers, while being part of a Government with a rhetoric of cracking down on migration—a rhetoric that, I might add, implicitly denigrates the parents of many of us in this House. He cannot be part of a Government with photocalls at airports to stress how they are cracking down on migrants. He cannot have it both ways. If he wishes to speak for a Government who are genuinely outward-looking, genuinely global in their outlook, he needs to move away definitively from that anti-migrant rhetoric and he needs to take steps to dismantle the hostile environment, much of which was implemented under this Government.

Conservative Members may say that the Labour party in government sometimes brought forward immigration legislation that was unfair and unsustainable. I should know—I voted against all of it. So please do not come to the Dispatch Box and make that point. Many of us who sit on the Front Bench voted against those items of legislation again and again. The question for this Government is not what previous Governments did, but what they are going to do. On immigration, rhetoric about global Britain is not enough; they need to dismantle the hostile environment, and they need to create a system that is at the same time fair to migrants, fair to employers and fair to the society.
Sajid Javid: First, I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments and for the conversation that we had earlier in the day. We might not always agree on issues, including the approach to immigration that is set out in the White Paper, but she has always approached these issues and debate with courtesy and respect. That is great to see and, sadly, not an attitude shown by every member of the Opposition Front-Bench team, as we saw a moment ago, but certainly she has always shown that. I may not see her again across the Dispatch Box before the end of the year, so I wish her and her team a happy Christmas.

The right hon. Lady asks a number of important questions. First, she rightly emphasises that we should make it clear that, whatever happens when it comes to immigration, it is fair to say that all parties are united in trying in their way to make sure that we remain an open and welcoming country to migrants from across the world who come to the UK to work, to study or to visit, and it is great to have a Parliament that almost universally accepts that. She, like me, is the child of first-generation migrants. Her parents, like mine and countless others, have made a huge contribution to this country and making it what it is, and we should all celebrate that and try to demonstrate that more as the kind of thing that we want to see in our country. I hope that, as the right hon. Lady and her colleagues have time to digest what is in the White Paper—I appreciate that it has just been published—they have the time to look at it in a way that convinces them that it demonstrates that openness.

The right hon. Lady raised a number of other issues. She used a phrase about slaying the myths of the past. One important aspect of the White Paper is that we have listened to the evidence. There is still more listening to do, which is why I said at the end of my statement that there is work to be done over the coming year to ensure that we engage with other political parties, devolved authorities, businesses and others. The starting point for that evidence was the work done by the Migration Advisory Committee, which is completely independent of Government. The MAC undertook a detailed report. It went to every part of the UK to listen and listen hard. It presented its evidence and we published that in full in September. Much of that—not exclusively—is reflected in the White Paper.

The right hon. Lady asked specifically about targets. We are committed to the Conservative party manifesto for this Parliament, but let me be clear: this is about the future immigration system. It is about emphasising control, but bringing net migration down to more sustainable levels. There are no targets in the White Paper.

I very much welcome the right hon. Lady’s support for the principle at the heart of the new system, which is that it is about an individual’s skills and what they have to contribute, not their nationality. There will be no preference to any particular nationality. To take her example, if a doctor or an engineer is coming to the UK it should not matter to us if that doctor or engineer is from India or France. What matters is what they have to contribute. That is at the heart of the proposals and she is right to highlight that principle.

The right hon. Lady asked me about salary thresholds. This is for the high-skilled worker route. The independent Migration Advisory Committee, based on its evidence, suggests a salary threshold of £30,000. What we have said is that we have listened, but that we need to do more work and have more extensive engagement before we come to a final figure. It will not be set in stone at £30,000 at this point. We will have to have more engagement to ensure that we get it right and come up with a threshold that we believe works for all parts of the UK.

The right hon. Lady asked me about the short-term workers route. One reason we included that in the White Paper is a recognition that, as we move away from freedom of movement, which I think all colleagues see as a very easy system to use with hardly any paperwork or bureaucracy involved, to a new system where everyone requires permission, it is right that we have a transition. The short-term workers scheme is a part of that transition, having a more balanced approach and recognising the needs of businesses across the country.

Lastly, the right hon. Lady talked about being open and welcoming, and about the Home Office learning lessons and changing its approach where appropriate. She will know that earlier this year we made changes to the tier 2 system, under the current immigration system, to remove doctors and nurses from the cap. She also rightly raised the Windrush crisis. All year, there has been a process to learn lessons from what went wrong. She is right to highlight that the Windrush problems began under a previous Government and continued under this Government. They should not have happened under any Government. It is right that we learn the lessons. Wendy Williams is working on an independent report. It will be a thorough independent report and she will go wherever she needs to to get to the evidence. That will be an important moment for us to all learn lessons.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. Obviously, I have not had a chance to read the White Paper, but much of what he said today is moving in the right direction. I hope he agrees with me that one of the problems with discussing migration over the past two decades has been that any time it is mentioned, people immediately accuse those who ask about reducing it of being racist. We have to bring an end to that level of debate, which has led to much of the frustration to which the right hon. Member for Hackney North and
Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) referred earlier, about the way the debate has been conducted. As one of those who voted leave, it was clear to me throughout that people did not want an end to migration; what they wanted was controlled migration. That is what I hope my right hon. Friend delivers today.

As far as I can see, the core bit that has caused the greatest problem has been the immediate access to social security benefits for people coming from the European Union. That has caused a big problem. Many businesses have, I am afraid, abused the process, getting them to come in and live in often quite squalid conditions, driving wages down for those who have much higher costs. Is my right hon. Friend prepared to deal with that issue to make sure that that is not a way of bringing in cheap labour? When he gets lectured by businesses and by others who say the health service cannot cope, will he remind them that for the past two decades—[Interruption.] This is a very important point.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. Gentleman’s point may be important, but it does need to be framed in the form of a question—briefly.

Mr Duncan Smith: Does my right hon. Friend accept that businesses have failed to invest in training and skilling the domestic population, with the result that only 15% of those who start life at entry level work will ever move beyond entry level work?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend for the points he raises. First, he is absolutely right to emphasise the need for control. That was clearly one of the messages of the referendum result. It is about control. Like any other major developed economy, there is no reason why Britain should not have control while also being fair in its approach to immigration. On access to benefits, the White Paper sets out—I appreciate he has not had opportunity to look at it in any detail yet—that on the short-term workers route, for example, there will be no right to public benefits and no dependants’ rights. This is a system that many other countries have followed. It is a fair approach both to people who come to our country to work and to the domestic population.

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of his statement and the Immigration Minister for taking the time to speak to me earlier today.

The proposals will make us all poorer economically, socially and in terms of opportunity. They signify not a “global Britain”, but an inward-looking Government and a Prime Minister still obsessed with net migration targets. When the Government talk about taking back control of our borders, what they mean is ripping up mutual rights to live, study, work and enjoy family life across Europe, depriving future generations of the amazing opportunities that our generations have enjoyed. Free movement has been brilliant for our people, and brilliant for Scotland and the UK, too.

When the Government talk about a skills-based system, they mean nothing of the sort. It is, to all intents and purposes, a salary-based system. We are talking about the carers, key NHS workers, lab technicians, researchers, bricklayers, and many other essential workers that this country needs. So why are the Government intent on slashing the family, social security and settlement rights of workers coming here under that income threshold? The proposals are degrading for workers, bad for employers and bad for community cohesion.

Why is the Home Secretary intent on forcing businesses to endure the expense, red tape and dubious reliability of a Home Office immigration system, when free movement has worked perfectly well? This is the opposite of cutting bureaucracy. Will the Home Secretary confirm the revenue that this will cost the Treasury? Will he confirm what the analysis shows about lost growth to the economy?

Finally, these announcements will be utterly disastrous for Scotland—socially and economically. Has the Home Office modelled the effect they will have on Scotland’s population, economy and public finances? Does the Home Secretary seriously think that reducing EU migration to Scotland, possibly by over 80%, is a good thing? If this is the best the Government can do, there is no better illustration of why we need decisions on immigration to be in Scotland’s hands.

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Gentleman claims that having one’s own immigration system and ending freedom of movement will make the country poorer. He should perhaps focus his attention on the number of other large developed countries—Australia, Canada, United States—that have their own independent immigration system. They are not poorer because of that. I do not think his logic follows at all.

The hon. Gentleman argues for continuing freedom of movement. He should cast his mind back to just over two years ago when the people of the United Kingdom voted to end it. Scottish citizens are members of the United Kingdom. They voted to end it. Lastly, he raises the issue of the salary threshold. When determining skill levels, it is perfectly reasonable that one of the factors to be taken into account is salary. It should not be based exclusively on that. If he cares to read the Migration Advisory Committee’s report from September, it will provide him with a lot more evidence for why this is a perfectly reasonable approach.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s statement. He has addressed the central conundrum of immigration policy, which is how to ensure the necessary controls on the numbers while also attracting not just our fair share, but—preferably—more than our fair share of the brightest and the best from around the world to help our economy and our communities. One issue, however, which I hope he will address, is that some of the brightest and the best are not necessarily in high-paid professions. How will his new system deal with that? I am thinking in particular of sectors such as social care. We want the best and brightest people from around the world, but many in those sectors will probably not be earning over the salary threshold. How will we continue to attract those people?

Sajid Javid: I thank my right hon. Friend, who speaks from experience as a former Immigration Minister. He asks a perfectly good question about how we can continue to attract the best and the brightest, especially if we are focused too rigidly on salary. One way we intend to do that in the new system is by taking a recommendation...
from the Migration Advisory Committee on shortage occupation lists. We will take that further, make it more dynamic and responsive, and review it more regularly. That will allow us, as it does in the current non-EEA immigration system, but much more effectively, to set lower salary thresholds for shortage occupations.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I will look very closely at what the Home Secretary has set out in the Immigration White Paper. We have heard many different stories about what it will include, but I am not sure we can entirely believe all of them, given the disputes we have seen between him and the Prime Minister.

I want to ask the Home Secretary a very specific question about immigration enforcement at our border in relation to no-deal planning. The permanent secretary of his Department told us on the Home Affairs Committee just a few weeks ago:

“It is not part of our contingency planning to deploy the armed forces.”

I pressed him on this, and he said again:

“It is not part of our no-deal planning that we would deploy the armed forces, for example, at the border.”

Was the permanent secretary misleading the Committee, or was it a surprise to the Department this morning when it was told that the Army could be deployed at the border for immigration enforcement and other purposes?

Sajid Javid: Of course, there is no-deal planning going on in the Home Office, as there is in every other Department. We do not expect it, but we need to plan for all contingencies. We are hiring more Border Force officers, and there will also be a taskforce, which is already being set up, and some of the new funding for those Border Force officers has already been announced. As for the use of soldiers, whether reservists or regulars, there is a broader plan—it is not part of the Home Office’s plan—to have up to 3,500 soldiers available for civil work as and when they are needed.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): In my judgment, there is a great deal to welcome in the Home Secretary’s statement, but will he bear in mind that it is completely inappropriate to pinch doctors and medical staff from developing countries? It is a form of reverse aid and it is quite wrong. When it does happen, will he discuss with the International Development Secretary using part of the development budget to replace such staff on a two for one basis, and should we not grow the number of doctors and medical staff we need in Britain?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend, who speaks from experience, raises a very important point. Of course, we cannot control who makes an application to come to the UK, or who sponsors them, but still he raises a very important point about other ways of helping or reducing concern in this area. One way is certainly through our international aid budget. He raises a second issue about doing everything we can to train more doctors and nurses here in the UK.

Sir Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Will the Home Secretary accept that the Home Office and Border Force already struggle to cope and that over the next three years they will have to deal with 3 million extra cases of EU citizens? How does he expect them to cope with this new temporary worker visa scheme, which will involve tens of thousands of employers, many of them contacting the Home Office for the first time, with a 12-month churn of staff? Far from bringing back control, will this not bring chaos?

Sajid Javid: I will give three answers to the right hon. Gentleman. First, the settlement scheme for the 3 million-plus EU citizens, which he mentions, is being separately staffed—more staff will be hired as the scheme properly rolls out—and much of the extra funding has already been allocated. Secondly, we will make the best use of technology—for example, we are expanding e-gate usage to eight other nations, which will help a lot. Lastly, the new system does not actually come into place until 2021, which gives us more than enough time to prepare.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Con): I seek clarification on three points. First, the Home Secretary talked about this coming in from 2021. When exactly does he mean? Does he mean January? Secondly, can he confirm to employers in my constituency that in the meantime there will be no change to the existing processes, systems and forms they have to use for non-UK workers, whether under the EU or the non-EU worker schemes? Finally, if he is to have a year-long public consultation, that will take us into 2019, and then obviously the Government will want time to look at the results in 2020. Can he assure me that businesses in my community will not suddenly be given a cut-off point on the salary just months before a new system is introduced in 2021?

Sajid Javid: First, the plan is to introduce the new system from January 2021—so from the end of the implementation period. Of course, if that period is extended—this assumes a deal scenario—it could be later. My right hon. Friend asked for an assurance that there will not be any change to employer checks between now and when the system comes in. The changes here will only come in from 2021, so there will be no changes to employer checks, including for EU citizens. She also asked for an assurance that the salary threshold will not be set suddenly. We will make sure in our work that it is not a sudden change and that businesses have time to prepare.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The Home Secretary was right to pay tribute to his parents. His father, a bus driver, and my mother, who worked at Camden Town tube station, belong to a generation that took so little and gave so much. They were like today’s careworkers, security guards and fruit pickers. He knows that they did not earn anything like £30,000 in the prices of the ’70s and ’80s. How will he look his children in the eyes and say he slammed behind him the door of opportunity that enabled him and me to sit in our seats today?

Sajid Javid: The door was closed on my parents and people from those Commonwealth countries in 1968 by a Commonwealth citizenship Act brought in by a Labour Government—so it was a Labour Government who
closed that door. [Interruption.] This is important. It is important that the right hon. Gentleman has all the facts in front of him. Going forward, it is important that we continue to provide opportunities for people with multi-skill levels to come and help in the UK, to settle and to study, which is why we have presented a system here that is focused on high-skilled workers but which, as he will have heard me say earlier, also includes a short-term workers scheme, and there will be other routes as well.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): I understand my right hon. Friend’s emphasis on attracting high-skilled workers, but is it not true that in recent years the British economy has been thirsty for new labour at all skills levels and that we want that to continue? This is particularly true for those parts of the UK where the local population is getting older and where freedom of movement has been a really good and important thing. Will he please make an effort to take evidence from all parts of the UK so as to understand how the local skills and labour markets operate and to strike the right balance with our new policy?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend has emphasised the importance of listening to those in all parts of the United Kingdom and ensuring that the new system works for them all. In that regard, there is a commitment in the White Paper to consider, for example, extending the shortage occupation list to Wales. Scotland already has one, but Wales does not. That is just one demonstration of how we can ensure that the system works for every part of the UK.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): The Home Secretary mentioned a streamlined application process for visitors. Can he confirm that the millions of visitors who come to this country from the EU every year will in future have to apply for, and receive, a visa or a visa waiver? If so, how much will it cost them?

Sajid Javid: Under the new system, all people entering the United Kingdom will require a form of visa or visa waiver. That will probably not start in 2021, because it will take longer to develop the system fully and introduce it. However, the electronic travel authorisation scheme, which I also mentioned in my statement, will apply to all visitors. The right hon. Gentleman asked about cost; we have not yet determined what the cost of the ETA scheme would be.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): As a first-generation immigrant, I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement. I feel that the White Paper represents a move from the 20th century to a much better future immigration system and shortage occupation measures, we still need to find a way to strike the right balance with our new policy?

Sajid Javid: We are committed to the 1951 convention, and I think that that commitment is shared across the House. As for the specific issue of work, it is one that we have been considering.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What are the implications of the UN agreement on migration that we have signed in Marrakesh?
Sajid Javid: The Foreign and Commonwealth Office is taking the lead on that, but as it is a completely non-legally binding agreement, there are no direct implications for the UK.

Mr Pat McNaffden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Immigration has benefited the UK, and the people who have come here, whether from Europe or from the rest of the world, have overwhelmingly come to work hard and make a positive contribution to this country. On the question of numbers, what is the Home Secretary’s estimate of the effect on immigration from the rest of the world of restricting immigration from the rest of Europe?

Sajid Javid: I wholeheartedly agree with the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the benefits of immigration for the UK, and I hope he agrees that my statement made that clear, but when we talk about benefits it is important for us to take a more holistic look at the impact on the UK and at what is in our national interest. In some cases, low-wage labour from abroad cannot become a substitute for investment in the upskilling of domestic labour or for improvements in domestic productivity.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Home Secretary will know that there is a dissonance between what liberal political establishments want and what the people want: that was made clear by the result of the referendum and the rise of right-wing populist parties in Europe. Can he convince the people that the subtle change of language from “tens of thousands” to “more sustainable levels” does not mean that he is no longer absolutely committed to controlling immigration? After all, many people wonder why, when he has been in charge of immigration from outside the EU, we have so palpably failed to control it. Does he realise that he charge of immigration from outside the EU, we have so many people wonder why, when he has been in sustainable levels” does not mean that he is no longer committed to controlling immigration? After all, many people wonder why, when he has been in charge of immigration from outside the EU, we have so palpably failed to control it. Does he realise that he charge of immigration from outside the EU, we have so many people wonder why, when he has been in charge of immigration from outside the EU, we have so palpably failed to control it. Does he realise that he charge of immigration from outside the EU, we have so
Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend makes an important point: clearly, the higher the population of a country and the more it rises, the more pressure there is on public services. Some communities have seen a very rapid change in population, sometimes to do with high levels of migration to that community. We must keep that in mind; it was one of the reasons why so many people voted to have control of our immigration system, and we must balance that against the economic needs we have to meet through migration.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I am heartbroken. This immigration Bill could have been an opportunity to show the world what an outward-looking nation we really are, and the proud tradition that we have of challenging racism in all its forms. Instead, it seems to be taking a very unhappy and unfortunate turn, with language such as “cooling-off” periods for people who come here to work. There is a global forced migration crisis, so why, on top of all the other things hon. Friends have mentioned, has the Home Secretary failed even to consider that this might have been an opportunity to reform the way this country responds to refugees?

Sajid Javid: I am not sure that the hon. Lady has read the White Paper that I have.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is absolutely right that the people of this country want to see a firm but fair immigration position, so what will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that the rules are operated fairly not only for people coming from the EU, but, more importantly, for our Commonwealth partners, in particular from the Indian subcontinent?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend raises the important issue of fairness based on what someone has to contribute, rather than their nationality. During the referendum campaign many British citizens were concerned that family and friends in the Indian subcontinent and other parts of the British Commonwealth might not be getting the same treatment as others were getting because of the preference that existed through the freedom of movement system. That is changing under this new system, and, when all is taken into account, this system is much fairer in its approach by focusing on skills rather than nationality.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): The UK fashion and textile industry contributes £32 billion to the economy but it thrives on a global pool of talent. As chair of the all-party group on textile and fashion I have heard concerns from the industry about the impact of any new measures on freedom of movement. I am sure the Home Secretary would suit Katharine Hamnett’s new t-shirt stating “Fashion Hates Brexit”, but what will he do to reassure this valuable industry that it will remain accessible and open to international talent?

Sajid Javid: First, the hon. Lady is right to raise the importance of the fashion and textile industry, and more generally our creative industries, where the UK is a powerhouse, and one of the things we need to do to keep it that way is make sure it can attract top talent from across the world. There is much in this White Paper that will help to achieve that, and it is also an area where in some cases in the past we have looked at having special visas for entry, including for exhibitions and visitors, and we will continue to look at such things.

Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): The short-term workers route mentioned in the statement will not address the issue that I and Members across the House have raised about access for non-EEA labour on inshore vessels. I have a constituent, Mr Scott in Lossiemouth, who fears he will have to sell his boat and his business unless the Government address this urgently. What can the Home Secretary do to address this issue for Mr Scott and others in Moray, Scotland and across the UK?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has perhaps raised two points: one is the future immigration system, where I think—I am happy to speak to him in detail about this afterwards—the short-term route can help address the issue he raises. I also detect a more immediate issue, however, that is not just for post-2021 and later, but is more immediate, because he mentioned non-EEA and I am also happy to discuss that with him, too.

Dame Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary talks about fairness, but in reality the Home Office displays a combination of hostility and inefficiency. Families are split up because visas have been agreed but not issued, and in my local case a Liverpool doctor who has worked in this country for many years after being trained here is having to go back to her country of origin because of a failure in the Home Office. I am still seeking a meeting with Home Office Ministers on that case. Will the year-long conversation that the Home Secretary spoke about include discussing changing the attitude of the Home Office so people are treated fairly and within the rules?

Sajid Javid: I am pleased that the hon. Lady has raised this important issue of fairness. The Home Office makes millions of immigration decisions, whether on visas or otherwise, each year and we cannot pretend that every single decision is going to be right. Earlier, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) raised the issue of Windrush, which was a problem under successive Governments, and we need to learn the lessons from that, and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) raised a live case from her constituency that the Minister for Immigration will be happy to meet her to discuss.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I welcome the proposal set out by the Home Secretary to have an immigration system that gets the best talent from around the world for our economy and public services. Will he also undertake to cover in this legislation the loophole of descendants for our economy and public services. Will he also undertake to cover in this legislation the loophole of descendants of the British Indian Ocean Territory, whose rights have been abused for the best part of half a century?

Sajid Javid: I know that my hon. Friend is passionate about this issue. He has championed it for a while and we have discussed it. It is not specifically addressed in the White Paper in terms of a future immigration system, but he is right to continue to raise the matter, and we are right to continue to work with him and to look at it.
Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the assurance that those who are already living in the UK will have their rights protected. It is a great pity that the EU was prepared to use those people as a negotiating ploy in the negotiations. Given the cap of £30,000 suggested in the White Paper, what assurances can the Secretary of State give me that areas such as Northern Ireland will have access to labour from outside the United Kingdom if it is required, owing to skills shortages, to keep production going?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for welcoming the scheme for the 3 million-plus EU citizens living here, whether in Northern Ireland or anywhere else in the UK. They are welcome to stay and indeed we need them to stay. I said earlier, and I say again, that whether we have a deal or no deal, that scheme and their rights will be protected. On the specific issue of Northern Ireland and regional shortages, we have in the White Paper committed for the first time to a separate shortage occupation list for Northern Ireland, which I think will make a big difference.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I, too, visited the Crick Institute this morning and I am sure that it will welcome the White Paper, as I do. I particularly welcome the consultation on the minimum salary requirements because, as my right hon. Friend will know, scientists, researchers and particularly technicians, who contribute hugely to our economy, are not always aware of salary requirements. How will the White Paper do that?

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend has emphasised an important point. The logic of having a salary threshold is strong, but it is also right that we look at cases where that will not quite work. He has given the example of lab technicians, whose salaries can be around £21,000. There are a variety of ways of trying to deal with that in the White Paper and I hope that he will welcome them.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am one of those who has valued free movement, but I welcome what the Home Secretary said today about overseas students. Is he in a position yet to offer any relief to those students—who he knows about—who had their visas cancelled after being accused, often wrongly, by an American firm of having cheated in their English language tests?

Sajid Javid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. As he has pointed out, the White Paper makes it easier for students, once they have completed their studies, to stay, to continue to contribute to the UK and to settle in the UK. On the specific issue, which I have discussed with him and other colleagues, we are still looking at this but we are taking it very seriously.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I very much welcome the Secretary of State coming to give us this statement from the Home Secretary. I also welcome the opportunity to set our own immigration policy for the first time in a generation and to ensure that it is fair, compassionate and meets the needs of our economy. However, the needs of our economy will change over time, and from region to region, so will he assure the House that flexibility will be built into our new immigration system? Will it be possible for the industry or industry bodies to have some sort of umbrella sponsorship scheme to ensure that we can continue to recruit workers to those roles in order to meet the Government’s own growth and house building expansion plans?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Lady has rightly raised this issue because she knows that many of the construction workers who are currently working on house building come under the freedom of movement rules and, once that changes, we will have to find a way to allow such workers still to come in to meet the needs of the economy. She asked specifically about umbrella sponsorship schemes and that is in the White Paper.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I welcome the statement from the Home Secretary. I also welcome the opportunity to set our own immigration policy for the first time in a generation and to ensure that it is fair, compassionate and meets the needs of our economy. Will it be possible for the industry or industry bodies to have some sort of umbrella sponsorship scheme to ensure that we can continue to recruit workers to those roles in order to meet the Government’s own growth and house building expansion plans?

Sajid Javid: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. He rightly says that our needs will change over time and this is an immigration system that will be built for the future. It will have those flexibilities to meet the needs of our economy and our society. I give him one example. When we look at the short-term workers scheme, we looked at the many needs of the economy, including, in Cornwall, the needs of the hospitality industry and the seasonal nature of much of that demand. So I can happily give him that assurance.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have the highest immigration caseload in Scotland, and what I see from the Home Office is cruelty, time and time again. Families are being separated, and the relatives of people who have lost babies are not being allowed to come to visit them. A man is working two jobs, as a mortgage adviser and a shelf stacker in Asda, just to meet the minimum income threshold so that his family can come to see him. I have also seen cruelty towards people who are qualified to work in the care industry but not allowed to do so by the Home Office. Is it not the case that under this policy EU nationals will be treated just as despicably and cruelly as non-EU nationals are at the moment?
Sajid Javid: I do not recognise the picture that the hon. Lady has painted, and the answer is no.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I welcome the statement. Will the Secretary of State explain how his electronic travel authorisation scheme will work in the common travel area, especially where a visitor arrives in Dublin and travels on to the UK from there? Would that visitor need to get authorisation in that situation?

Sajid Javid: This will not apply to Irish citizens and British citizens moving within the common travel area. My hon. Friend will know that the EU is planning to introduce a similar scheme; I think it is called ETIAS—the European travel information and authorisation system. As we develop this, we are looking at ways of working together.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm that a chapter is closing overdue. I ask the Home Secretary to take the year that he has built in to ensure that we get it right, because that is the only way we will undo some of the damage that has been done by the policies of previous Government, of all colours.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend makes a very important point, highlighting that when we make immigration policy we must consider not just economic need, but the pace and volume of immigration. He gives an excellent example of a community that has seen dramatic change in a short period, and of the impact on local infrastructure and public services. It is very important to get the balance right.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Many Black Country foundries, which are crucial to the supply chains for civil aviation and the motor industry, are sustained by EU recruits, because they have an ageing workforce and cannot recruit locally. What conversations has the Home Secretary had with the industry on the impact of the short-term visa requirements on the future availability of EU migrants and the potential impact on businesses?

Sajid Javid: I will make two points in answer to that. First, all the EU citizens who are already here, whether they work in those foundries or elsewhere, will be able to stay—and we want them to stay—so there should be no change in the current EU workforce. Secondly, with regard to the high-skilled workers scheme and the short-term workers scheme set out in the White Paper, we have already engaged with business groups, but I have set out today that there will be much more such engagement, with business in every region across the country, before the schemes are finalised, especially in relation to thresholds and cooling-off periods.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Government’s commitment to giving priority to those workers who have the skills we need. I also welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement today of a year-long programme of engagement across the UK. May I therefore extend an invitation to him, and indeed to my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister, to visit Banff and Buchan, an area of very low unemployment, to talk to businesses to see for themselves the specific skills that are much needed in the fisheries sector, both for catching offshore and for processing onshore, and that can be sourced not just from the EU, of course, but from across the world, including Africa and east Asia?

Sajid Javid: I am sure that the Immigration Minister and I would both like to visit, although not necessarily at the same time, so we are happy to receive that invitation. My hon. Friend makes an important point that relates to many parts of the UK, but particularly to Scotland—many other colleagues from Scotland have raised it—and it is important to look at that. I think that the system we have set out today will have the flexibility to meet those needs, but I am happy to discuss those with him further.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Immigration, whether from Europe or from right around the world, has made an enormously positive difference to my community and to our country, making us rich in every way imaginable. However, given that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet are evident proof that being highly paid and highly skilled are not the same thing, why do the Government persist with this nonsense of a £30,000 cap to define what constitutes highly skilled? Plenty of people in this country are paid far less than the Home Secretary, and far less than £30,000, and it would be an absolute tragedy to pull up the drawbridge for them, not just denying them opportunity, but denying our country the skills and prosperity we need.

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman is clearly lobbying for a pay rise for all members of the Cabinet—I will leave that to him, but it is not something the Cabinet is asking for. It is important that the threshold for the highly skilled visa route set out in the White Paper is
based on evidence and works for each part of the country. The MAC has suggested—I emphasise that this is based on its own independent research—that the threshold should be £30,000, but further work and extensive engagement with businesses, devolved authorities, Members of Parliament and others is required to determine what that should actually be.

**Alison McGovern** (Wirral South) (Lab): I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) actually wanted a pay cut for members of the Cabinet. I had thought that the Home Secretary was a free marketeer, but what he has given us today is a bureaucrats charter to increase paperwork and red tape around business. The White Paper states, on page 47:

“The MAC has recommended lowering the skills threshold for the new skilled workers...while maintaining the minimum salary threshold of £30,000.”

This is clearly not a skills-based immigration policy, but a money-based immigration policy. Will he therefore explain how on earth he thinks our country plans to deal with its demographic challenge?

**Sajid Javid:** I am afraid that I do not agree with the hon. Lady’s assertions. She suggests that somehow this will lead to more bureaucracy and red tape, but having no cap and no resident labour market test for high-skilled workers and more use of e-gates are all examples of where there will be less bureaucracy and less red tape.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): This is just a Faragist blueprint for drawbridge Britain, a grotesque plan simply to keep people out of this country. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to be absolutely straight with the British people that their freedom of movement will come to an end? What we do to the EU, it will do to us, and all the unrestricted rights that we have had, to live, work and love across a community of 27 nations, will be lost to our young people forever. Is that not an absolute tragedy and shame?

**Sajid Javid:** The people of the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. That means the end of freedom of movement.

**Owen Smith** (Pontypridd) (Lab): The Home Secretary rightly said in his statement that the UK has a proud history of being an open and welcoming country, so it must sadden him, as it saddens me, that that reputation is being consigned to history by his Government. This White Paper is one further policy that will damage that reputation. He also said that this policy will boost our economy, but that seems deeply implausible, given that EU migrants made a net contribution to this country, and that in various ways. One example specific to Wales is a commitment in the White Paper to look at a shortage occupation list and by saying when it will come into effect?

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of regional differences. The system will take account of that in various ways. One example specific to Wales is a commitment in the White Paper to look at a shortage occupation list for Wales.

**Paul Blomfield** (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Home Secretary owes my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) an apology for the way in which he brushed aside her question. He made no reference to refugees in his statement. I have now had an opportunity to scan the relevant section of the White Paper, and it is peppered with words such as “maintain,” “continue” and “no change.” If my hon. Friend is wrong, will the Home Secretary spell out exactly how this White Paper proposes to improve the way we receive and treat refugees?

**Sajid Javid:** The White Paper is a result of the referendum result, which means no to freedom of movement.

**Paul Blomfield:** Answer the question.

**Sajid Javid:** If the hon. Gentleman gives me a chance, I will answer his question. The vote to leave means that we will have a new immigration system. The Government commissioned work from the Migration Advisory Committee to consider what the system should look like, by removing freedom of movement, and how we will get the skills we need. It is very focused on skills; it is not focused on the issue of refugees and any changes. Nor do we have to wait for any changes that may or may not be made in terms of refugees. For example, there have been a number of changes in recent months and
years on unaccompanied children and other cases, such as the Syrian White Helmets. Such decisions do not have to wait for a new immigration system. We are perfectly capable of making those decisions now under the current system.

**Gavin Robinson** (Belfast East) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary for listening to the representations that I have made on behalf of my party as its home affairs spokesperson, and that my party's leader and parliamentary leader have made, in respect of the income threshold. Just as average pay in Wales is £27,000, in Northern Ireland it is £24,500. The MAC report is wrong to suggest that there should be a one-size-fits-all income threshold. In going to consultation, it sounds as if the Home Secretary agrees with it, but will he give serious consideration, during the consultation and following the outcome of the process, to regional variations that reflect our regional differences?

**Sajid Javid:** As the hon. Gentleman highlights, it is important that we look at regional differences. One way of trying to accommodate such differences is through a shortage occupation list, and we have committed here today that Northern Ireland will have its own shortage occupation list. As we have referenced in the White Paper, I am also conscious that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that has a land border with the EU, which causes other issues that also need to be looked at. We will certainly take that into account, too.

**Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Page 8 of the White Paper retains the notion that there should be targets in our immigration system, including an objective number of people who can come, rather than recognising the need to look at skills. I encourage the Home Secretary to resist continuing this pointless exercise in targets and, instead, to look at issues in our public services and our NHS.

We have a nursing shortage of 100,000, and the nursing starting salary is £23,000. Since the Government cancelled the nursing bursary, the number of people training to be nurses in this country has dropped by 13%. When he looks at immigration and at salary levels, will he look at them in the round of our economy and our public services, and not take lessons from Conservative Members and the cutting of our international aid agencies? Will he instead recognise that a country that is spending £1.4 billion on agency fees for nurses within the NHS really needs to rethink how it treats the people who treat us best?

**Sajid Javid:** I always listen carefully to what hon. Members, businesses, hospitals and others have to say. The hon. Lady mentions nurses, and an example in relation to nurses—and doctors, for that matter—is the change we made earlier this year to the current tier 2 scheme to take doctors and nurses out of the cap altogether. That decision was welcomed by the sector. She may also know that nurses are currently on the shortage occupation list, which shows just how seriously the Government take this issue.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) asked the Prime Minister directly at Prime Minister’s questions if she still stands behind the ludicrous policy of cutting net migration to the tens of thousands. If the White Paper—admittedly it is a White Paper—is fully implemented in legislation, what conclusions has the Home Office come to on the resulting level of net migration?

**Sajid Javid:** The commitment of the White Paper and of the system it represents is to bring net migration down to a more sustainable level.

**Jo Stevens** (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Average earnings in Wales are, in fact, less than £26,500 a year, so does the Home Secretary recognise the damage that his policy will do to the Welsh economy? I ask him please not to tell me about a shortage occupation list, because that list will extend from one end of this Chamber to the other.

**Sajid Javid:** I believe the system will work for all parts of the UK. I do not recognise the point that it will do damage to the Welsh economy, which would be the wrong conclusion to draw from the system. I had a discussion this morning with the First Minister of Wales in which we went through the White Paper in a bit more detail. Obviously the First Minister needs to look at it more carefully, and I am happy to sit down with him and with hon. Members who represent Wales to discuss it further.

**Brendan O’Hara** (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): Will the Home Secretary confirm that, in preparing this White Paper, careful cognisance was given to the needs of every part of the United Kingdom? That being so, can he explain exactly what part the rural west of Scotland—a fragile, low-wage economy in an area that desperately needs more people—played in shaping his thinking?

**Sajid Javid:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point about making sure the White Paper works for all parts of the UK, which is why in preparing it my right hon. Friend the Immigration Minister held roundtables with business, for example, and had other forms of engagement in every part of the UK, including Scotland. I have had extensive engagement with Scottish Conservative Members, who have taken a deep interest in this. [ Interruption. ] I am happy to listen to the hon. Gentleman and others, and together we can make sure that, as we finalise them, the plans set out in the White Paper work for all parts of the UK.

**Emma Hardy** (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I am sure the Home Secretary is fully aware of the recruitment crisis and the huge number of shortages in many of our schools. I am sure he is also fully aware that the starting salary for teachers is only £23,000, so will he look at lowering the £30,000 threshold to ensure that our children have the expert teachers they desperately need?

**Sajid Javid:** The White Paper makes it clear that we have committed to ensuring that, when it is set, the threshold is right for the needs of all parts of the country, whether it is our schools or otherwise. It is also important we make sure we have an immigration system that also incentivises domestic employers to invest in the skills of local people. Immigration should never be thought of as a substitute for investment in local people.
Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Home Secretary’s boss, the Prime Minister, talks proudly of ending free movement once and for all, in complete denial of the fact that free movement has been one of the biggest sources of opportunity for UK citizens in the past quarter of a century. Let us be in no doubt: this White Paper is not being taken forward in Scotland’s name. This statement highlights exactly why we have asked, time and again, for immigration powers to be devolved. Will the Government have a rethink and devolve immigration powers to the Scottish Parliament? We voted to remain, and we want no piece of this whatsoever.

Sajid Javid: Scotland is part of the United Kingdom and we have a single immigration policy for the entire UK.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The majority of my constituency casework is about immigration. People are experiencing so many different levels and different types of delays, and I am not convinced that through this White Paper we will be able to deal with the level of bureaucracy involved in managing the resulting immigration. I am also very concerned about the one-year visas, as well as about the five-year visas, because they will affect the workforce who are here and will affect people’s livelihoods in terms of their security and investing in the UK.

Sajid Javid: On bureaucracy and red tape, we have tried to develop an immigration system that takes advantage of the latest technology—it is much more digital. We have taken a much closer look at how other countries that have long had a completely independent immigration system have done that. We have also made a commitment to reduce the overall net burden on all businesses, taken together. By having this approach, we will end up reducing red tape, not increasing it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As for many Members of this House, the majority of my casework is taken up with immigration matters. I was alarmed that the Secretary of State did not mention anything about the appalling practice of indefinite immigration detention in his statement. That practice is a shameful stain on our country’s reputation; the UK is the only country in Europe that does it without limit. It is a shameful practice in Europe that does it without limit. It is appalling that the Secretary of State did not mention anything about the one-year visas, as well as about the five-year visas, because they will affect the workforce who are here and will affect people’s livelihoods in terms of their security and investing in the UK.

Sajid Javid: On bureaucracy and red tape, we have tried to develop an immigration system that takes advantage of the latest technology—it is much more digital. We have taken a much closer look at how other countries that have long had a completely independent immigration system have done that. We have also made a commitment to reduce the overall net burden on all businesses, taken together. By having this approach, we will end up reducing red tape, not increasing it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As for many Members of this House, the majority of my casework is taken up with immigration matters. I was alarmed that the Secretary of State did not mention anything about the appalling practice of indefinite immigration detention in his statement. That practice is a shameful stain on our country’s reputation; the UK is the only country in Europe that does it without limit. It is appalling and it should be ended immediately, without any sort of reservation. We need to stop it. My constituent Duc Nguyen was detained, despite being a trafficking victim, and was moved arbitrarily around the UK to keep at Yarl’s Wood.

Sajid Javid: On bureaucracy and red tape, we have tried to develop an immigration system that takes advantage of the latest technology—it is much more digital. We have taken a much closer look at how other countries that have long had a completely independent immigration system have done that. We have also made a commitment to reduce the overall net burden on all businesses, taken together. By having this approach, we will end up reducing red tape, not increasing it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As for many Members of this House, the majority of my casework is taken up with immigration matters. I was alarmed that the Secretary of State did not mention anything about the appalling practice of indefinite immigration detention in his statement. That practice is a shameful stain on our country’s reputation; the UK is the only country in Europe that does it without limit. It is appalling and it should be ended immediately, without any sort of reservation. We need to stop it. My constituent Duc Nguyen was detained, despite being a trafficking victim, and was moved arbitrarily around the UK to keep at Yarl’s Wood.

Sajid Javid: On bureaucracy and red tape, we have tried to develop an immigration system that takes advantage of the latest technology—it is much more digital. We have taken a much closer look at how other countries that have long had a completely independent immigration system have done that. We have also made a commitment to reduce the overall net burden on all businesses, taken together. By having this approach, we will end up reducing red tape, not increasing it.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): As for many Members of this House, the majority of my casework is taken up with immigration matters. I was alarmed that the Secretary of State did not mention anything about the appalling practice of indefinite immigration detention in his statement. That practice is a shameful stain on our country’s reputation; the UK is the only country in Europe that does it without limit. It is appalling and it should be ended immediately, without any sort of reservation. We need to stop it. My constituent Duc Nguyen was detained, despite being a trafficking victim, and was moved arbitrarily around the UK to keep at Yarl’s Wood.

Sajid Javid: We should always be looking to make sure we are doing everything we can to improve how we approach detention in this country. We do not have a policy of indefinite detention; no one can be detained unless there is a reasonable prospect of a removal in a reasonable time. Some 90% of people who are detained are released or removed within four months. One reason we have now commissioned two independent reports on the detention system is to look at ways in which we can make improvements. For example, one of the recent things I have started is a pilot scheme to look at alternatives to detention for people who otherwise would have been kept at Yarl’s Wood.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I think we all know that the £30,000 salary cap fudge is just a political cop-out. The message from the science and research sector around Cambridge could not be clearer: please do not use salary levels as a proxy for skills. The University of Cambridge has warned that extending the non-EEA system would significantly harm the UK’s competitiveness. I realise that the Home Secretary is constrained by the intransigence in the Downing Street bunker, but could he at least, as Home Secretary, recognise just how important this issue is to the science and research sector?

Sajid Javid: One reason why Britain is outstanding at science and research is that we welcome talent from across the world, and that will not change with the new immigration system. When it comes to talent employed in our universities—I used the example of lab technicians earlier, because it was one that the MAC used in its report—it is important to recognise that salary does not always determine skill level, and that will be taken into account in the new system. Many students who come to study at our great universities study sciences, engineering and other subjects, where we have a shortage in this country, and we should be making it easier for them to stay and work in the UK if that is what they choose to do. This White Paper does just that.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): First, I wish to say that immigration has been fabulous for Scotland. The Home Secretary has said repeatedly that this White Paper is skills-based. Could he therefore give us a definition of what “high-skilled,” “medium-skilled” and “low-skilled” occupations are, possibly with an example to illustrate each?

Sajid Javid: In looking at skills we have been led by the evidence and an objective analysis, and the MAC has set that out. Skill levels have been defined, having looked at the regulated qualifications framework levels of skill, which are well defined already. The MAC has also suggested, rightly, that we take other factors into account, and we have had discussion in the House today about salary thresholds and how we will look at that issue further. There is also a multi-skilled route, so it is not linked to any qualification or salary, and that is the short-term workers scheme.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): People from non-EU countries and their families, including many of my constituents, have borne the brunt of the Home Office’s hostile environment, so they were very receptive to the targeted message to them from the leave campaign in the referendum saying that if we left the EU, the UK would free up non-EU immigration. Naturally, many local people bought that message. So was there any truth in that message? Or will there be just as many unreasonable refusals for EU citizens in the future as there have been up to now for non-EU citizens?
Sajid Javid: First, may I gently remind the hon. Lady that the term “hostile environment” in the Home Office was coined by Labour Ministers. It was a Labour Government policy, to the extent that it was ever a policy. I would be interested to see what she had to say about the policy at that time. She has asked me specifically about non-EU migration. What this White Paper does with the new system is achieve a much fairer view of that and a much better balance, levelling the playing field by looking at people’s skills and what they have to offer this country, rather than at their nationality.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I hope this point of order relates directly to the statement from the Home Secretary. Otherwise, it should come after the statement on Yemen.

Rachel Maclean: It relates directly to exchanges in the Chamber from very much earlier. It is a matter of extreme urgency—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I will take those points of order afterwards. The course of action being taken has been made clear, so I ask the hon. Lady to make her point of order after the next statement.

Yemen

2.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Mr Speaker, with permission, I will make a statement on the quest for a political settlement to the war in Yemen.

Last week, the Houthi rebels and the Government of Yemen held their first direct peace talks since 2016. The negotiations in Stockholm reached agreement on a ceasefire in the port city of Hodeidah and a mutual redeployment of forces, monitored by the United Nations. As we look forward to Christmas, the people of Yemen are enduring one of the gravest humanitarian crises in the world. Hunger and disease are ravaging large areas of the country: 420,000 children have been treated for malnutrition; as many as 85,000 have starved to death. Today, 24 million Yemenis, more than 85% of the population, need help. Behind these stark, impersonal numbers lie real people—individual men, women and children—with hopes and aspirations no different from our own. Their ordeal is not the result of natural disaster or misfortune; this is a man-made calamity, imposed by a war that has torn the country apart and reduced its people to penury, hence the imperative need to resolve this conflict as rapidly as possible.

From the beginning, Britain has made every effort to promote a political solution. Last month, I travelled to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, which lead the coalition fighting to restore Yemen’s legitimate Government. I later visited Iran, which supports the Houthi rebels. In every capital, I urged my counterparts to use all their influence to help bring their parties to the negotiating table. After my visit to the region, agreement was reached for 50 wounded Houthis to be evacuated from Yemen to Oman, a confidence-building measure intended to pave the way for peace talks. On 19 November, I instructed our mission at the United Nations to circulate a draft resolution to the Security Council, reinforcing the need for a political settlement and demanding the unhindered flow of food and medicine throughout Yemen.

On 6 December, the peace talks began in Stockholm, mediated by Martin Griffiths, the UN special envoy. Last Wednesday, I went to Stockholm, and the following day I met the leaders of both delegations. I was the first British Minister to meet representatives of the Houthis. I urged the parties to seize the opportunity to reach agreements that would ease the suffering of the Yemeni people and move closer to the goal of ending the war. Last Thursday, the talks concluded with an agreement for the parties to meet again in January and to build trust by releasing thousands of prisoners.

Members will note the importance of the agreement on a ceasefire and redeployment in Hodeidah. The port is a lifeline for Yemen and the channel for at least 70% of the country’s food imports. The ceasefire in Hodeidah port and city came into effect at midnight yesterday, and the UN special envoy has reported that it seems to be working. If the ceasefire continues to hold and the UN succeeds in increasing the volume of traffic through the port, that should reduce the level of suffering.

I have urged all parties to stick to the terms agreed last week in Stockholm so that we can find a lasting political solution to this devastating conflict.
After the talks, I spoke about the next steps to the UN Secretary-General António Guterres and the Foreign Ministers of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Earlier, I discussed the situation with Secretary Pompeo of the United States. Based on those consultations and the success of the peace talks, I have instructed our mission in New York to resume work on a draft resolution with our Security Council partners, with a view to adopting it later this week. We will ask the Security Council to vote on the draft within the next 48 hours. The UK text aims to build on the momentum generated in Stockholm by endorsing the agreements reached between the parties, authorising the UN to monitor their implementation and setting out urgent steps to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. Our aim is to mobilise the collective weight of the UN behind the progress that that has been made.

I am grateful to Martin Griffiths for his dogged efforts, which are nothing short of heroic. I acknowledge the seriousness of purpose of those in the delegations from both sides whom I met in Stockholm last week. I offer my thanks to the British diplomats, both in the region and at the Foreign Office in London, who have worked assiduously behind the scenes to bring the parties together. Britain has been able to play this role because of our network of friendships—including our partnership with Saudi Arabia and the UAE—and because we are a country that will always step up to its responsibilities.

Although the House can draw encouragement from recent events, I do not wish to give false hope. The positive steps that we have seen could easily be reversed. The ceasefire is highly fragile. Many complex and difficult problems have yet to be addressed, let alone resolved. The people of Yemen still carry an immense burden of suffering, and although we can see some light at the end of the tunnel, we should be in no doubt that Yemen is still very much in the tunnel. For as long as necessary, this country will continue to use all the diplomatic and humanitarian tools at our command to help to settle this terrible conflict. Our values demand no less. I commend this statement to the House.

Over the past three years, there have been precious few moments of hope in relation to Yemen. This is indeed a moment of hope, and one that we must seize, so I want to use the time I have today to ask the Foreign Secretary about the next steps in this process. First, I greatly welcome his confirmation that a resolution is to be tabled this week at the UN Security Council, to underpin this ceasefire and ensure that all necessary steps are taken to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. Will he give us his assessment, based on his talks, of whether the United States stands ready to support the resolution this time around? Will he also address the crucial issue of what mechanisms there will be to monitor compliance by all sides with the terms of the resolution? What penalties or sanctions are proposed for any breach of those terms?

Secondly, I think that we all warmly welcome the appointment of General Cammaert to oversee the logistics and security of the operation in Hodeidah. Someone of his experience and toughness is ideally suited to what we all recognise will be an incredibly difficult task. Will the Foreign Secretary give us more details on how the security operation on the ground will be staffed? What is the thinking behind the decision that it should not be an armed blue-helmets operation? Will that decision be kept under review should General Cammaert decide that that is what is required once he is on the ground?

Thirdly, we have spoken previously about the fact that the ceasefire agreement will apply initially only to Hodeidah. We all understand that that is the most urgent priority in tackling the humanitarian crisis, but will the Foreign Secretary tell us what the proposed next steps are in brokering a wider ceasefire in other areas of the conflict, including Taiz, and, indeed, in brokering a wider political settlement for the whole country, including southern Yemen?

Fourthly, this is another issue that we have discussed previously, but I am sure that we all believe it is an important principle. In Yemen, as in Syria, while the immediate priority is to foster the hope of peace and get humanitarian aid to those in desperate need, we must also ensure that there is proper accountability for all alleged breaches of international humanitarian law committed by both sides in the conflict. That can happen only when we have a comprehensive, independent, UN-led investigation into all those alleged crimes. Will the Foreign Secretary tell us whether such an investigation is proposed in the UN resolution to be tabled this week? If not, what are the proposed next steps on that front?

Finally, there is another important principle that it would be easy to sweep under the carpet at this time, when we are keen to keep Saudi Arabia on board with the ceasefire and get its support for the proposed UN resolution. However, I hope the Foreign Secretary will agree that it would be manifestly wrong if Saudi Arabia were able to trade its compliance with ending the conflict in Yemen for the world turning a blind eye to the question of who was responsible for ordering the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. Tomorrow, it will be 80 days since he was murdered. In Washington, the CIA has given evidence to Senators that led those Senators to conclude overwhelmingly that Crown Prince bin Salman ordered the murder of Mr Khashoggi, yet in this Parliament we are still waiting for any official conclusion from the Foreign Office or the security services on who was responsible. Will the Foreign Secretary make it clear...
today that the issues of peace in Yemen and accountability for the murder of Mr Khashoggi are entirely separate? Will he tell us when he will present his conclusions on the latter?

Mr Hunt: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for the constructive tone of her comments and for crediting Mark Lowcock and his team at the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for the very important role that they are playing at the moment. Indeed, it is important to say that the draft text of the Security Council resolution that the UK is putting together puts as much emphasis on the humanitarian aspects of this terrible conflict as it does on the peace talks in Stockholm, very much because of Mark Lowcock’s specific and important requests.

Let me go through the points that the right hon. Lady makes in order. First, I am confident that we have US co-operation in the process of tabling the Security Council resolution. We have had extensive discussions with the US, as well as with all the other sides in this terrible war. I am speaking to Secretary Pompeo later this afternoon, and this will be one of the things that we discuss in detail.

The right hon. Lady asks about the mechanism to monitor compliance. She is absolutely right that General Cammaert and his team of monitors will be essential. They are due to arrive in Hodeidah on Saturday. Their monitoring of what is going on is only made possible by having a UN Security Council resolution, which is why people have come together to make the passing of the resolution possible.

The draft resolution will require weekly report backs by the Secretary-General to the Security Council based on General Cammaert’s evidence as to whether we have compliance with what was agreed in Stockholm. The right honourable Lady is right that that is extremely important. She is also right to say that it is not just Hodeidah. The draft statement talks about the other ports—Saleef and Ras Issa—that are extremely important, but, of course, what we actually need is peace in the whole country. Hodeidah is strategically the most important place to start with, because if we can open up the road between Hodeidah and the capital Sana’a, then we can start to get humanitarian supplies in. The Stockholm talks gave a three-week period, starting from midnight last night, by when that road, the port and the city of Hodeidah have to be cleared of all combatants, and that is what we are holding our breath for.

On accountability, I have the draft wording of the resolution here. First, it underlines the obligation on all parties to act in accordance, at all times, with principles of international humanitarian law. It also underlines the need for transparent, credible and timely investigations into alleged violations of international humanitarian law and for those found responsible to be held to account.

The right hon. Lady also raised the issue of Khashoggi. She is absolutely right that these are separate issues and that they cannot be linked, and I do give her that reassurance. As far as the UK Government are concerned, the issue of Khashoggi is not closed. We do not think that all the facts have been established and we have not seen proper conclusions from the Turkish investigation as to what actually happened. As soon as we have those conclusions, we will share them with the House.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): It is a real relief in the terrible catastrophe that is the Yemen today to strongly support the actions taken by the Foreign Secretary in going to Stockholm, Tehran and Riyadh and in trying to win the confidence of both sides. May I also thank him for his absolutely accurate remarks about Sir Mark Lowcock, head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, who was my permanent secretary, and about the superb work that has been done by Martin Griffiths? There are, of course, 10 million Yemenis on the brink of starvation this Christmas. I urge him to ensure that the new UN resolution is genuinely even-handed and condemns violence from all sides, whether Houthi missiles fired at Riyadh or Saudi bombing of built-up areas. If it is not even-handed, there is a grave danger that it will prejudice the next round of negotiations in January.

Mr Hunt: May I thank my right hon. Friend for his long-standing interest in what has been happening in Yemen? He is one of the few Members of this House who has actually met the Houthi leadership and he has enormous experience. I thank him for continuing to raise this issue even when it was not high up everyone else’s agenda. He is absolutely right about the importance of this UN resolution being balanced. It does indeed refer to the issue of Iranian missiles being fired into Saudi Arabia from Yemen. However, the way that we will be able to unite all sides behind this resolution is to focus on what was agreed at Stockholm and also on the humanitarian needs of the people of Yemen. We should not—if I can put it this way—go into too much detail about the causes of the conflict, which inevitably become more controversial. What we are trying to do at this stage is to build up the trust on both sides so that the fighting stops.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. I, too, wish to put on record our thanks to him and to his officials for their ongoing work. I know that this a crucial few weeks coming up. I particularly wish to put on record our thanks to Martin Griffiths and Mark Lowcock for their work, which underscores the importance of multilateral agencies such as the United Nations.

I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for his tone, which he has used in previous statements, about the recognition of the acute humanitarian disaster that has unfolded. We must seize the opportunity for peace. Will he tell the House what steps he is taking to ensure that aid reaches those who are most in need and who are worst affected, because that will be important in these coming weeks.

Furthermore, peacebuilding requires long-term investment—I know that he and his officials recognise that—and we know that from conflicts elsewhere. We continue to be concerned that arms sales to combatants in this conflict far outstrip aid. I am also concerned that we often hear from the Foreign Secretary—I hope that he takes this criticism in the tone in which it is meant—that arms sales means influence, but if we look at some of the key influencers elsewhere, they have stopped arms sales. I am talking about Canada, Germany, and, more recently, Spain. Will he tell us, as we go into these crucial few weeks, why the UK is different? Will he reassess that approach to arms sales, as the UK is
increasingly isolated in this regard? May I finally welcome the wording? The question of accountability is incredibly important, and that wording is good progress. I also welcome his remarks about Khashoggi, but I would like to hear his reflections on the US Senate findings and his reassurances, again, that he will make a full statement to the House when those findings are clear.

**Mr Hunt**: Let me take those issues. First, on the humanitarian side, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East met the International Committee of the Red Cross yesterday to make sure that we are fully briefed. The hon. Gentleman will know that we are the second largest bilateral donor—I think we gave £170 million in the past year alone to help the conflict in Yemen—so we treat the issue very seriously. In terms of what specifically we are doing, the main issue is opening up the road between Hodeidah and the capital Sana’a. That is why a major focus of these talks has been to get that corridor opened. That is very, very challenging, but we did succeed in that. We did not succeed in getting the airport in Sana’a opened, which was a disappointment, because we could not get agreement on which flights would be allowed to go from that airport, but that is something that we hope to do.

There is something that I did not mention in response to the shadow Foreign Secretary, but that is relevant to the hon. Gentleman’s question. The next step is to try to get the parties back round the table for another round of peace talks at the end of January. That will be to discuss the framework for a political settlement. The idea is that this is the first step that builds up confidence between both sides and allows the fighting to stop, and then we can move towards the political settlement.

On the arms embargos, we have a process that was set up by the previous Labour Government in 2000, which I think we have to follow. It is one of the strictest processes in the world and it means that we independently look at whether there is a risk of a violation of international humanitarian law. To reassure the hon. Gentleman, the draft wording of the UN Security Council resolution does emphasise the legally binding obligation on all member states to comply with the arms embargo imposed by resolution 2216, and, as I mentioned before, the obligation on all parties to act at all times in accordance with international humanitarian law.

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I pay tribute to the Foreign Office Ministers assembled here today for the amount of work that they have put in? I am talking about not just the Secretary of State himself and the Minister for the Middle East, but the Minister for Europe and the Americas who has done an awful lot of diplomacy here with our allies. I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) whose attention to detail in the Yemen matter has been second to none. May I also, unusually, pay tribute to the shadow Foreign Secretary who, again, has conducted herself with dignity and who has been extremely rigorous in her questioning and helpful in her argument? What we are dealing with here is an horrific humanitarian disaster that we have seen emerge over past years. Am I right in saying that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has done an awful lot of work in getting to the peace talks, but that the next stage is what we are looking at? Yes, of course, there is the monitoring, but then there is also the confidence building, and that will come by the delivery of aid, by the visible progress on the ground and by the actual success that comes to both parties from the achievement of peace. Can my right hon. Friend perhaps say a little bit about that?

**Mr Hunt**: In terms of visible, confidence-building measures on the ground, one of the most important things is to get money into the Yemen economy through the Central Bank of Yemen in order to strengthen its functioning, and to ensure that pensions and civil servants’ salaries are paid. That will bring spending power into the economy and is covered in the draft UN resolution. When it comes to the next steps, the basic issue is that the Houthis, who are around 15% of the population, recognise that they can only have a junior part in a Government of national unity, which has to be the next step, but they need to have confidence that they will be secure in being able to play that part. That is why it is going to be important to build up confidence over the next six weeks. They accept the principle, but they have to be confident that it will be delivered. Of course, given what has happened, there is a huge amount of mistrust.

**Stephen Twigg** (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement and the progress that has been made with the Stockholm talks. I also echo his praise for both Martin Griffiths and Mark Lowcock.

On ceasefire monitoring, the special envoy explicitly requested a robust UN regime, answerable to the UN Security Council. Can the Foreign Secretary assure the House that that is what is provided in the current text? On confidence building, one of the issues that would really secure greater confidence would be agreement on the reopening of Sana’a airport. Is that being considered in the next stage?

**Mr Hunt**: I thank the hon. Gentleman and his Select Committee on International Development for their sustained interest in Yemen; I also thank him for his personal commitment to making progress.

The monitoring mechanism is UN-authorised and will be reporting back to the UN. It is led by a Dutch general and the UN Secretary-General will be requested to report back weekly, so absolutely yes to that question. I raised the question of the airport with both delegations. We were hoping that we could get agreement to reopen Sana’a airport. There are essentially two international flights—I think to Egypt and Jordan—but the Government of Yemen wanted to insist that the international flights first went to Aden, which they control. The Houthis were reluctant to do that, so we were not able to reach an agreement, but it is very much the next step.

**Bob Stewart** (Beckenham) (Con): Allow me to concentrate on the corridor between Hodeidah and Sana’a, which will be 140 miles long, through very rough country. Whichever peacekeeping or monitoring force goes in has to be of the highest quality because, speaking from my own experience, that is one heck of a distance to monitor. And then, beyond Sana’a—or direct from the port—there will have to be corridors out
to get aid, because this aid will not succeed unless the people who are hungry put it in their mouths. That is the crucial thing that we have got to achieve.

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and his own experience of peacekeeping in Bosnia informs his questions, as the whole House will have seen. We do have the commitment from both sides to clear that road of combatants, but we will not succeed unless there is enough trust between both sides actually to sustain it. We are taking this one step at a time. I agree with my hon. Friend that there is a long way ahead to make this happen, but—to reassure him—the UN will be monitoring what happens very closely, and anyone who breaks this agreement will face the full wrath of the UN and the members of the Security Council.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): The fact that the Foreign Secretary has been able to report tentative progress to the House today after so much suffering and bloodshed is a reminder of the importance of seizing the moment and of courageous political leadership. I join all the other Members who have expressed their thanks to him, Martin Griffiths, Mark Lowcock and lots of other people who have worked very hard to bring this moment about. He said that Patrick Cammaert and his team may arrive on Saturday. Is it his understanding that the redeployment committee that he is responsible for chairing will have representation from the two warring parties—that they will turn up? On the peace process, it has been reported that the Government of Yemen were unwilling to sign an outline peace plan in Stockholm because they thought it gave too much to the Houthis and not enough to them. Can he confirm whether that is the case, and what does he think now needs to happen in order to win their confidence so that a peace plan can indeed make progress?

**Mr Hunt:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his long-standing interest in this issue. On the second of those two questions, I will find out precisely what I know about it, but I do not think it was the objective to secure the framework in Stockholm; I think that was known about it, but I do not think it was the objective to do that. On the second of those two questions, I will find out precisely what I know about it, but—to reassure him—the UN will be monitoring what happens very closely, and anyone who breaks this agreement will face the full wrath of the UN and the members of the Security Council.

**Mr Hunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for championing this very sad case; we know about it extremely well, thanks to the representations that he has made. We are in contact with the Home Office about this matter. Until now, our difficulty has been that we have not had consular representation in Yemen. Obviously, that is something that we hope will change, but we will do everything we can to support his constituent and their family in the way that he wants.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the progress he has made thus far, but clearly this is a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, so could he elaborate on the attitude of both those countries towards this fragile peace negotiation, and on what further steps he can take to encourage them to promote peace, rather than war?

**Mr Hunt:** My hon. Friend is right that this is the biggest geostrategic risk from the conflict in Yemen, but the sense I had when I went to both Riyadh and Tehran is that neither side wants to perpetuate it and both sides would like to see it concluded, if for no other reason than that the appalling humanitarian consequences of this conflict have become all too apparent. I think they feel a sense of responsibility for what is happening to fellow Muslims and want to do something about it.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): We are approaching Christmas and I understand that one of the three wise men in the Bible story was the King of Sheba, which is modern Yemen. Christmas is very much a peace story, so it is very significant that we are talking about how we can bring peace to a country that is very disturbed. I thank the Foreign Secretary for his efforts, but I want to ask again, at which point will the Government consider suspending arms trade with Saudi Arabia? The question has been asked before, but I did not really understand exactly what the Government are doing.

**Mr Hunt:** Let me repeat it, then. We have one of the strictest arms control regimes in the world. We also have an independently run process that assesses the risk of a breach of international humanitarian law, and we follow that process.
Hodeidah that will allow humanitarian aid to flow through. Can the Foreign Secretary confirm that he has had discussions with his colleagues in the Department for International Development about what role Britain will play in ensuring that there is long-term support to rebuild this country?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely confirm that we have extensive discussions with my right hon. Friend the International Development Secretary. Indeed, we raised the issue of Yemen yesterday at the National Security Council, and we are both in constant contact.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): It is a huge relief that the ceasefire has been implemented, and I endorse all the words of thanks that have gone before. However, does the Foreign Secretary genuinely believe that Iran has changed its view, given that this regime has deliberately increased the suffering and starvation of the Yemeni people that it has purported to be supporting? Does he believe that a peace deal that created an Iran-backed regime in Yemen could be catastrophic to peace in the middle east and must be ruled out at all costs?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There will never be peace unless it guarantees Saudi Arabia, one of Yemen’s neighbours, its territorial integrity. Saudi Arabia has had Iranian missiles fired into its capital from Yemen, which is a huge concern to it. Do I genuinely believe that the Iranians have changed? I think the answer is that we would not have got the agreement we got in Stockholm without the support of both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. So I do think there has been a change, but there is still a long way to go.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): All those in the Chamber will welcome the peace talks recently held in Stockholm and the progress that was indeed made there. Is my right hon. Friend confident that this will prove to be a stepping stone to a desperately needed permanent ceasefire in Yemen?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is right that that is the holy grail. If we can get a proper, full, permanent ceasefire for the whole country, then everyone will have a huge sigh of relief. We are taking small steps towards that with the ceasefire in Hodeidah, but the intention is that that builds trust between the parties that allows for the full ceasefire that he rightly calls for.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): First, I thank the Secretary of State for the work that he has done so far: it has been very heartening to see the progress that has been made. Kristine Beckerle from Human Rights Watch has pointed to the significance of prisoner exchange in the agreement, especially as this concerns political prisoners, activists, journalists, people of minority faiths such as the Baha’i, and refugees—men, boys and even women arbitrarily detained through the conflict. What assurances can he give on this, and what support will he give to the International Committee of the Red Cross to ensure that this is closely monitored so that all those arbitrarily or deliberately detained will see freedom, and see it soon?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the issue of prisoner exchanges, because that is pretty much the very first way that we can build trust between both sides. That is what happened at Stockholm—the agreement does that. The UN resolution will be making sure that all the important parts of the Stockholm agreement are properly, independently monitored by the United Nations.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): The international condemnation of the Saudi regime is almost unanimous. Many prominent EU member states, most recently Germany and Spain, along with Canada and now the US this week, have taken steps to either condemn the actions of the Saudi regime or suspend arms sales. If the UK wants to recover any semblance of moral leadership, should it not join the US Senate in condemning the regime’s illegal conduct and immediately suspend arms sales?

Mr Hunt: I gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that there is no point in setting up an independent process that is one of the strictest in the world if we then do not go on to follow it, and that is what we are doing.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Eighteen thousand children, some as young as 10, have been used as soldiers in this horrific war. They have been forced to torture and to kill with the promise of money for their families, largely by the Houthi rebels. Officially this has been denied, but Associated Press has interviewed no fewer than 18 child soldiers who have been exploited. When the Foreign Secretary met the Houthis, did he raise this matter? What discussions has he had with, and what assurances has he sought from, the UN envoy to Yemen to seek to ensure that the protection of all children is paramount and not an afterthought?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely reassure the hon. Lady that the protection of children, and indeed everyone vulnerable, is on all our minds, but certainly on the minds of the people who are trying to get the two sides together, because it is the escalating humanitarian crisis that has been a real engine for the talks. In terms of when we raise the issue of terrible behaviour with participants on all sides, there is a time and a place to do that, and at Stockholm we were trying to bring everyone together. So while we are setting up accountability mechanisms, we also have to recognise that the primary objective now is to get the fighting to stop.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): The use of child soldiers and the deliberate targeting of civilians are just two examples of the types of atrocities we have seen in this terrible war. While I very much appreciate the wording of the draft resolution on those responsible being held to account, will the Foreign Secretary set out how he is going to try to ensure, in practical terms, that investigation of these terrible human rights breaches is entirely independent?

Mr Hunt: We want it to be independent. The word used in the UN resolution is “credible”. Unless we have a credible investigation into these atrocities, we will not get closure on the issue, and there will not be justice or confidence.
Griffiths and his team, along with the Foreign Office, have they raised? How are Martin seriously. What initial reactions has he had from other political colour, when the office holder takes the job and his ministerial team for making this progress—albeit other Members in commending the Foreign Secretary this terrible conflict—is a huge first step, and we would first ceasefire that we have had in the entire history of step. At the moment, getting agreement to a ceasefire—the is right, and it must happen, but we have to go step by step. I support fully independent investigations into everything that has happened. That has to cover the whole country. It has to give confidence to the Houthis that despite being a minority, their rights are going to be respected, but it also has to give confidence to all minorities, so I agree with him.

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman has a lot of experience of this from his time on the Foreign Affairs Committee. He is absolutely right. A Government of national unity has to cover the whole country. It has to give confidence to the Houthis that despite being a minority, their rights are going to be respected, but it also has to give confidence to all minorities, so I agree with him.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Given accusations that gratuitous war crimes have been perpetrated by both Saudi Arabia and Iran, as the key regional proxies in this conflict, and their failure to honestly and openly investigate those accusations, why will the Secretary of State not support an independent UN-backed inquiry into allegations of war crimes perpetrated by all sides in the Yemen conflict? Why is that not included in the United Nations draft resolution?

Mr Hunt: Because the draft resolution has to have the consensus of both sides. I support fully independent investigations into everything that has happened. That is right, and it must happen, but we have to go step by step. At the moment, getting agreement to a ceasefire—the first ceasefire that we have had in the entire history of this terrible conflict—is a huge first step, and we would not want to compromise that.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his thoughtful and measured approach. Has he or the Minister for the Middle East, whose work I also commend, had any discussions with the United Nations high commissioner for refugees about possible consequences for numbers of refugees or internally displaced people and how we will respond?

Mr Hunt: My right hon. Friend the Minister for the Middle East says he spoke to Filippo Grandi a couple of weeks ago about that issue.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): May I join other Members in commending the Foreign Secretary and his ministerial team for making this progress—albeit fragile—with regard to Yemen? It is amazing what a Foreign Secretary can achieve in office, regardless of political colour, when the office holder takes the job seriously. What initial reactions has he had from other Security Council members to the draft resolution? What concerns, if any, have they raised? How are Martin Griffiths and his team, along with the Foreign Office team, addressing those concerns?

Mr Hunt: As the hon. Gentleman will know from his work on the Foreign Affairs Committee, there is a range of views on the Security Council. Broadly speaking, there is a combination of people who are naturally sympathetic to one side or the other and people who think that the most important thing now is to move forward with humanitarian relief, and it is about bringing those people together.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I think every Member of the House is delighted with these first steps in the peace process in Yemen to alleviate this tragic humanitarian crisis, which has gone on for too long. Nothing sums up this crisis more than at the weekend, when a sister and brother aged six and four were shot by Houthi snipers for trying to play out in the street. It is a terrible situation. Will the Foreign Secretary also raise the 1 million landmines left by the Houthis, which is a terrible legacy that will need clearing up in these peace talks? Will his final resolution to the UN include free and fair elections?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman’s point about landmines is very important. The UK has a lot of experience and fantastic NGOs that work in that area, and I am sure we would want to make them available to service the people of Yemen. The draft resolution does not talk about the future political framework, important though that is. That is really a stage for the next set of talks, which we hope will happen in January.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I want to add my warm words about this agreement, which is a positive step forward. I am pleased that the Foreign Secretary mentioned not only Hodeidah but Ras Isa, because without opening up that fuel terminal, we will be unable to get food to the rest of the country. However, at Foreign Office questions, Ministers told us that they could not tell the House whether UK-manufactured weapons or planes were involved in the deaths of civilians and possible war crimes. The head of the independent office that he mentioned recommended, in his professional judgment, that arms sales should be suspended, but Ministers overturned that judgment. Will the Foreign Secretary now look again at suspending arms sales?

Mr Hunt: I do not know where the hon. Gentleman gets that information from, but it is not correct.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I would like to thank the Secretary of State and his team for the work they have been doing on this grave issue of the war in Yemen. It has been a war on children and the most vulnerable. Every 10 minutes, a child dies in Yemen. My local churches are desperate to do all they can, and I know that the Minister for the Middle East will be visiting the DFID office in my constituency tomorrow. What more can we do as MPs, communities and constituents to avert the humanitarian disaster that has encompassed Yemen?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. The answer is that we can all ensure that our constituents know about the issues in Yemen and encourage people to support the charities and NGOs that are funding the humanitarian work there.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his sterling endeavours, leadership and constructive role on visits to the area over the last few months; it has been much appreciated. Given reports
that 67% of the Yemen population need urgent action to save lives and livelihoods, 20 million Yemenis are vulnerable to death and a quarter of a million are on the brink of starvation, can he outline the type of aid that has gone from here to there in the last three months and what plans there are to help with equipment and support, to allow people to survive and to work safely?

Mr Hunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. With the £170 million that we gave in the last year alone, we are supporting food, water, shelter and other vital relief for people in this desperate situation.

Speaker’s Statement

3.34 pm

Mr Speaker: As I promised the House, I have looked at the television footage of the Leader of the Opposition reacting to the Prime Minister, allegedly saying “stupid woman” to those seated next to him. Having heard the allegation against the Leader of the Opposition and having watched the footage, it is easy to see why the Leader of the Opposition’s words might be construed as “stupid woman”. That was also the opinion of lipspeakers—and I emphasise, lipspeakers rather than lipreaders—whose advice was sought and obtained at short notice.

As may be known to Members of the House—it is important in terms of establishing the context—but may not be known to others watching or listening to our proceedings, the right hon. Gentleman the Leader of the Opposition was seated at the time and not addressing the House, so whatever he said was not, and is not, audible on the House’s audio-visual record. As I have told the House, I neither saw the incident nor heard anything. It was, for the same reasons, neither heard nor seen by the Clerks or by my private secretary, nor was there any immediate reaction in the House.

I believe that the allegation made by a number of hon. and right hon. Members was based upon the visual evidence from Parliament TV. I also have to rely purely on visual evidence. I am not a lipreader, or indeed, a lipspeaker. Nobody can be 100% certain. That includes professional lipreaders, but I will naturally take, and would be expected to take, the word of any right hon. or hon. Member. It is reasonable to expect the House to do the same. I therefore invite the right hon. Gentleman, who has at my request returned to the House for this purpose, to make his explanation to the House, which again, I expect to be heard without interruption.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and thank you for your invitation to come to make a short point to the House, which I am very happy to do, and I have come immediately to do that. During Prime Minister’s Question Time today, I referred to those who I believe were seeking to turn a debate about the national crisis facing our country into a pantomime as “stupid people”. I did not use the words “stupid woman” about the Prime Minister or anyone else and am completely opposed to the use of sexist or misogynist language in absolutely any form at all. I am happy to place that on the record at your request this afternoon. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think that the country and this House will have drawn their own conclusions—[Interuption.] I deeply regret that the right hon. Gentleman has not seen fit to apologise to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Lady for what she has said, which requires no comment from the Chair.
Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. With your guidance, how may I make this orderly? Read my lips. I do not believe him. What can we do to further verify this evidence? What can we do to further ask experts to review this evidence and get the apology from the right hon. Gentleman that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister deserves?

Mr Speaker: It is not open to a Member to impugn the integrity of another Member. That is—[Interruption.] Order, please. That is a violation of the established—[Interruption.] If the hon. Lady will permit me. She has raised a point of order, perfectly reasonably, and I am responding to her. It is not in order to impute dishonour to another Member. That is a very long established convention of this House, so it is not orderly to accuse another Member of dishonesty.

When the hon. Lady inquires what further may be done, the answer to her is that people can seek to solicit opinions on this matter, including of a professional character. I have offered, at short notice, as I thought was my duty, the fruits of the professional advice that I have received and I have shared that very openly with the House. It is not for the Chair to pronounce judgment—guilty or innocent—upon a Member. It is well established that a Member is to be taken at his or her word. If the matter is to be further discussed, debated or commented on, that is to be expected, but it is not a matter of order for the Chair now. That is as full and, I hope the hon. Lady will agree, as courteous a response as I could possibly be expected to provide.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have heard the words “stupid woman” being used in this Chamber about myself, and I am afraid to say I have heard it from yourself in the Speaker’s Chair. So please can we have an apology, draw a line under this and move on?

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for her point of order. I understood that she had made this observation outside the House. What I want to say to the hon. Lady, whom I always treat with great respect in this Chamber, is the following. The hon. Lady has at no time previously—that is to say, prior to today—made that allegation against me. The hon. Lady has not come to me and said that, and to my knowledge—[Interruption.] If the hon. Lady will do me the courtesy of allowing me to respond to her point of order, as she has raised it. To my knowledge, I am not in receipt of a letter alleging that. If there is such an allegation, I refute it 100%.

I have received a letter from the hon. Lady, as she knows, within I think the last 24 hours, on an unrelated matter—specifically to do with proxy voting and baby leave—and I believe I am right in saying—[Interruption.] Perhaps the hon. Lady will do me the courtesy of allowing me to respond. I believe I am right in saying that she wrote to me on that matter, at least in part, in her capacity as chair of the all-party group on women in Parliament. To that letter, she will of course receive a response.

That contention has not previously been made, but if it is now made, I say with absolute certainty, it is not correct. I have not said that to or about the hon. Lady. That is my response to the hon. Lady.

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to say it is nice to be back. I just wonder what conclusion members of the public will draw from the Chamber being used in this way. My right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) has made his point. I have heard from my constituency office today that residents in my constituency have had to have present parcels delivered to them because they cannot afford to buy their children presents and they have not got the money for food. The Chamber being used in this way is absolutely pathetic.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has made her own point in her own way. It is on the record, and I thank her for taking part in these proceedings.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to other Members—preferably to people who have not already raised points of order. I call Helen Whately.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think, actually, it is important what language is used in this Chamber. In this centenary year, a large number of us on both sides of the House have made huge efforts to encourage more women to stand for Parliament. Many of them have been successful: I believe women are coming forward. It is a great shame that we seem to be nearing the end of the year on such a sour note. May I urge you, Mr Speaker, to do more to make sure that the tone of this Chamber is better next year—not just to draw a line under this, but to make sure that next year is better on these points?

Mr Speaker: May I say to the hon. Lady. I think that is an entirely reasonable point of order. I am happy to do my bit, and everybody else should do their bit as well. I have the highest regard for the hon. Lady, whose commitment on these issues is well known to me. I hope she and others will take it in the right spirit if I say that throughout my nine and a half years in the Chair to date, I have devoted myself to the cause of trying to open up this place. I have sought to do everything I can to promote a progressive approach in the Chamber, in the calling of Members, in the functions that I host in Speaker’s House, and in the approach to facilities on the estate, which did not previously exist. That is all part of the record. It is manifest, it is observable and it is incontrovertible. Can we all do better? We can. Should we? We should. Will we? I hope that we will. So I am agreeing with the hon. Lady. Lady, and I am sure that that will please her.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think everybody in the House would know of the well respected and much admired deaf musician, Dame Evelyn Glennie, the world-famous percussionist. On live television this afternoon, she was shown by the presenter of that television programme the clip of the Leader of the Opposition and was asked what he had said, and she said, “He said, ‘Stupid woman.’” Is there any way I can put it on the record that, with that tone of apology from the right hon. Gentleman, it would have been better if he hadn’t bothered?

Mr Speaker: I do not honestly think, and I say this in all courtesy to the hon. Gentleman, whom I have known for three decades, that he is really very interested in anything I have to say in response to him.
Simon Hoare: I am.

Mr Speaker: No, and I am not even complaining. I am not criticising the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful for his good humour. The hon. Gentleman wanted to make his own point and he has made it. I stand by what I previously said. He has made an important point, but it is not a contradiction of what I have said about the impossibility of certainty, nor is it inconsistent with the spontaneous interpretation which I myself offered. But I repeat: it was my interpretation—I am not a lipreader, I am not a lipspeaker, and it is not for me to cast judgment in this matter. Fair-minded people, who are interested in the merits of the issue—and I am sure that includes the hon. Gentleman—will know that what I say is true.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I also agree that we have a responsibility, as Members of this House, to uphold the very highest standards in language about each other, but also about each other’s integrity, and I do hope that we will be able to see a renewed commitment to that next year. Mr Speaker, I have been proud to sit on your Committee for enhancing equality and diversity in this House since very soon after I was elected, and to put on the record my thanks to you for your commitment to equality and diversity in this House in so many different matters.

My point of order is on a slightly different topic, however. According to press reports of a leaked Department for Work and Pensions document, “EU Exit Planning—Economic Downturn”, the Government, as part of their long-term contingency planning in the event of no deal, suggested they would create a strategy with other Departments for handling the negative impacts, such as homelessness, poverty and suicide. If that is true, these are extremely serious allegations or matters, and should be brought explicitly to this House, so that we may have access to Government analysis as to who they expect to fall into poverty, where homelessness could rise, and who they see as being at risk of suicide.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I think I have already pointed to the impossibility of certainty in these matters. I repeat that I think most people would accept the reasonableness of my point. I note, with interest and respect, the point the right hon. Gentleman, who is an extremely experienced and distinguished parliamentarian, has made.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I fully accept what you have said. You were not in the eyeline of the Leader of the Opposition. Sitting where I was sitting, I was in the eyeline of the Leader of the Opposition. I have to accept what he has said at the Dispatch Box, because I do not think he would deliberately lie to the House, but other people will be able to draw their own conclusions.

Mr Speaker: May I, off the top of my head, thank the right hon. Gentleman for what he has said and for the understated terms in which he has said it? People can form their own judgment, but I appreciate the fact that the right hon. Gentleman is not seeking to prolong the argument further—at any rate, on the evidence of what he has just said. That, I think, is respected. He is a very senior Member of this House with long experience.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I thank you, Mr Speaker? You said you would go away, look at the video evidence and make your mind up. You did that and I am very grateful. But it is for my constituents to make their own mind up when they look at the footage. It is for them to decide if the Leader of the Opposition—or anyone else—is indeed a misogynist or antisemitic, not us.

Mr Speaker: With great respect, I heard the hon. Gentleman out and it was right to do so. He has made his own point, including a point that was not germane to these exchanges or this controversy, but it stands on the record. I said I would look into it. I have looked into it. I have come back to the House and I have said what I have said. The Leader of the Opposition has said what he has said. I do not honestly think I can be expected to add to that, but I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), may I say to you, with the greatest of respect, Mr Speaker, that there are occasions when people do leave the Chamber feeling that they have been offended by yourself? The fact that the hon. Member felt that way, yet did not feel that there was an appropriate process in place to make that complaint or concern felt, probably suggests we still have work to do in terms of raising issues and concerns in this place.

Mr Speaker: There is always work to do. Progress is not a matter of an isolated Act or a single initiative, but rather of a continuous process. I accept the significance of what the hon. Gentleman says in that regard, which seems to me to be unexceptionable.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As somebody who is still a relative new Member of this House, I wonder if you could advise me on how I can explain to my constituents the level of party politics that is being played out—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. That observation from the beginning of that point of order has met with much criticism, but I would very gently say to Members that they cannot have it both ways. They cannot on the one hand talk
about wanting respect for their own right to speak and their own opinion, but not accord a comparable level of respect to someone who happens to express a view that differs from their own.

Laura Smith: You hit on the end of my point, Mr Speaker. The level of hypocrisy in this place is quite astounding. On the Opposition Benches, we have to put up with the most disgraceful insults thrown at us, nobody more so than the Leader of the Opposition, who has to put up with it day in, day out.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has made her point with force and in her own way, and I thank her for doing so; she is perfectly in order, and it is now on the record.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The guidance that you issued to Members earlier in the week drew attention to both the need for temperate language and the provisions around misogynistic language as part of the respect policy. If these rules do not apply to the Leader of the Opposition, what protection can Members’ staff and staff of the House expect where behaviour is not broadcast live on international television?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. The simple answer is that the rules apply to every right hon. and hon. Member of the House. That is the factual answer. I can do nothing other than provide the factual answer, but I thank him for what he has said.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Yes, I will take the remaining points of order, but I do ask the House to consider the other business to which we need to proceed.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On a different note, and one for which I hope a point of order should be used, I seek your advice—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. This is not a moment for levity; I want to hear what the hon. Gentleman has to say.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I seek your advice, Mr Speaker, on how I could get clarification of the answer that I received from the Foreign Secretary in the Yemen statement. I said that the senior civil servant in the arms control unit had advised against sales and that Ministers had overturned that. The Foreign Secretary declared that that was not true. The Foreign Secretary and the International Trade Secretary both refused to attend the hearing of the Committees on Arms Export Controls this year and have both said that they will not attend next year. How can we get them to come before the CAEC to answer these questions?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman can request attendance. Insofar as he inquires about other recourse open to him, my advice to the hon. Gentleman, who is a resourceful individual, is that he should make the short journey from the Chamber to the Table Office to table questions on this matter. It may be that he will feel inclined to table more than one question. He may table several. He may do so on a repeated basis. There is no prohibition on repetition in the House of Commons.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (Saffron Walden) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to your remarks earlier about impugning another Member’s honour and integrity, I distinctly heard during Prime Minister’s questions the Leader of the Opposition refer to my right hon. Friend’s actions as criminal. I have checked Hansard, and that is on the record. Is that in order?

Mr Speaker: It is perfectly in order to offer that expression of opinion, and I say that on advice from the Clerk. I did not witness that exchange.

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): He said it.

Mr Speaker: I am not asking the Minister of State what she thinks he said; I am responding to the hon. Lady’s point of order. People are entitled to offer their own views within the rules of order, and to the best of my knowledge, nothing disorderly was said. I am happy to look at the record and consult further, but the advice I have received is that nothing disorderly was said.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I suspect that most of us are in the Chamber to hear a very important application for an emergency debate on the single most important issue that has faced our country in peacetime, and the public looking in will find this spectacle completely ludicrous. Can we please move on to the important business of the House?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. I hope he will understand if I say that it is not possible in these matters to please everyone. I am trying to do the right thing by listening to, taking account of and offering a response to points of order, but I am conscious, as the House will be, that we have important business to which to proceed, and I intend that we shall do so. I politely suggest that if people have already made points of order, they should not treat them as an ongoing debate. If somebody raises a point of order, and I respond to it, it is reasonable to proceed to the next person and then to a conclusion of those points of order.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Trust in politics is very important. The vast majority of us have now seen the video. Members on both sides of the House have commented that they thought the words used were “stupid woman”. Members of the public have commented on Twitter and elsewhere that they thought the words were “stupid woman”. If I understand you correctly, Mr Speaker, your own interpretation of the video was that the words used were “stupid woman”, and that your lipspeaker and the lipreader of my hon. Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) have said the same.

I take the right hon. Member for Isllington North (Jeremy Corbyn) at his word, because I am sure that—as my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said—he would not lie in the Chamber. However, I am very concerned about the possibility that incongruity between the different statements will affect trust in politics, and I want to know how you could use your good offices, Mr Speaker, to ensure that
[Dr Caroline Johnson]

it is not affected adversely by the incongruity between what has been said by the right hon. Gentleman and the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Mr Speaker: The answer is, by behaving well on a regular basis and by attending to our responsibilities in the House. That, encapsulated in a sentence, is my response to the hon. Lady’s point of order, and I think it is fair and reasonable.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) was right in saying that whatever the Leader of the Opposition said was not said on the record; the Leader of the Opposition, however, has now put it on the record by coming to the Dispatch Box and making his statement. Anyone—and I mean anyone, not just those in the Chamber—who has a complaint to make about that has recourse to the proper procedures involving the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. Surely at this time of all times, Mr Speaker, it is important that we use the proper procedures, rather than proceeding to trial by points of order in the Chamber.

Mr Speaker: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman that we do not have, or we should not have, trial by points of order. That is not consistent with any due process. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me if I say to him that, as far as I understand it, conduct in the Chamber does not fall within the purview of the Commissioner for Parliamentary Standards, so I do not think that an allegation of misconduct on that front in this situation could be adjudicated by the Commissioner. I do not think that that is correct. What I will say is that there are opportunities for Members to continue this argument and debate if they so wish, but I genuinely ask the House, how does it avail our deliberations on the one hand and not choosing to participate in it on the other. There is no incongruity, there is no incompatibility, there is no inconsistency, there is no contradiction. I hope the hon. Gentleman, who is a most courteous and assiduous Member of this House, will accept that I am well familiar with the procedures of this House and I know of what I speak. The hon. Gentleman might think that that is odd or peculiar or that it offends his sensibilities in some way—and I am sorry if that is the case—but there is nothing wrong or procedurally improper about that at all. I am asked if I have an estimate of the number of Members: no, I am extraordinarily grateful about that at all. I am asked if I have an estimate of the number of Members, so I do not.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con) rose—

James Heappey (Wells) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will take two more points of order, and then I really do think that we should draw the matter to a close.

Paul Scully: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I should like to bring it to a close, in asking you whether, in order to enable Members in this place and members of the public to make up their own minds, you might publish the advice that you received. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: I am advised “No”, and I stick to the advice “No”. I must say to the hon. Gentleman that I consulted. There was no written advice from the lipspeakers; this was done at very short notice, and I was given a view by them. It was not without qualification. I will not go into the detail of it—I gave the essence of it—but it was not without qualification or caveat. There is, however, no written advice from the lipspeakers. I hope that I have not misunderstood the hon. Gentleman. I do not think that there is merit in persisting with this exchange, but that is my response to him.

James Heappey: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I change the subject, and return to the issue raised by the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw)? There has been a series of Standing Order No. 24 debates recently. On Monday, more than 50 Opposition Members rose, and barely a dozen or so spoke. The previous week, the Opposition Benches were full at the point of application, and barely 20 Opposition Members spoke thereafter. In your reviewing of Hansard, Mr Speaker, have you noticed any inconsistency between the urgency shown in applying for Standing Order No. 24 debates and participation thereafter, and in your review of the content of the speeches in those debates, have you noticed any difference between that content and the content of our more routine discourse on Brexit? Finally, Mr Speaker, as Opposition Members may shortly rise to support such a debate tomorrow, have you any expectation of how many of them will then attend to speak in it?

Mr Speaker: My answer to the last point is no, and my response to the hon. Gentleman—I thank him for his multi-faceted point of order—is as follows: there is absolutely no inconsistency whatever between Members rising to support the granting of a debate on the one hand and not choosing to participate in it on the other. There is no incongruity, there is no incompatibility, there is no inconsistency, there is no contradiction. I hope the hon. Gentleman, who is a most courteous and assiduous Member of this House, will accept that I am well familiar with the procedures of this House and I know of what I speak. The hon. Gentleman might think that that is odd or peculiar or that it offends his sensibilities in some way—and I am sorry if that is the case—but there is nothing wrong or procedurally improper about that at all. I am asked if I have an estimate of the number of Members: no, I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Gentleman for attributing to me powers that I do not possess, but I am not psychic.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This morning there was a knife attack in a surgery in my constituency and three people were attacked. Do you agree that instead of debating points of order about what was said earlier, we should draw a line under that and move on to the substantive issues that affect our constituencies, because otherwise people will rightly think that collective stupidity has taken hold of this House?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for what she has said and the sincerity with which I know she said it—I know all Members speak with sincerity. I hope we can shortly move on.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab) rose—

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

Mr Speaker: But not until we have heard from, I think, two other Members. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) is a national institution and I want to save him until the end. I call Catherine West.

Catherine West: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I have saved this point of order until now as it is not to do with our earlier debate. On 28 November I tabled a
named day question to the Home Secretary regarded LGBT asylum cases, and three weeks have now passed but, sadly, no answer to the question has materialised. I understand that the Government are in complete meltdown over Brexit, but can you, Mr Speaker, offer any guidance as to what parliamentary mechanisms are available to compel the Home Secretary to answer these important inquiries?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of this matter. Responsibility for answering parliamentary questions lies with the departmental Ministers concerned. I certainly agree that it is unsatisfactory if Ministers do not respond to questions in the expected timescale, and to be so late in responding to a named day question would appear to be particularly unacceptable. Successive Leaders of the House have also accepted a responsibility to take up such tardiness of reply, or indeed non-reply, with departmental Ministers.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for signalling from a sedentary position that she, too, does so and takes such matters seriously.

I would further suggest to the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) that she write to the Chair of the Procedure Committee, the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), who is in our midst, as his Committee takes an active part in monitoring the timeliness of Government answers to parliamentary questions. Meanwhile, no doubt her concern has been noted on the Treasury Bench.

Lastly, I think, on the Opposition Benches I want to hear the point of order from the hon. Member for Huddersfield, who was first elected to the House 39 years, seven months and 16 days ago.

Mr Sheerman: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I was going to start my remarks by saying that I have been in the House longer than you, and that is true. I am also well known to be a bit of a chunterer; I often turn to the person next to me and say quite rude things—not dreadful, but rude—about something I disagree with. This is a serious point of order: I cannot believe that this House is going to get to the stage where these events happen when someone says something under their breath—“What a silly sod”, for instance, which I say very often, quite loudly, under my breath. We cannot have a system here where we start lipreading something someone has said to their next-door neighbour when passions are high in this House. It is supposed to be a place of high passions, but it is also a place where we treat people like adults, and today we have been like badly behaved children. We are in a crucial time in the history of our country—the most delicate and worrying time in my time in the House—and we have spent all these hours on this matter. I believe the Leader of the Opposition said what he said; let us draw a line under it and get on and act like grown-ups.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. Before we proceed, all I would like to do is to plant in the minds of hon. and right hon. Members one simple fact, which is that a number of very senior Members with long experience of this House, and coming from both sides of it, have in recent months made a very similar point. Today, the hon. Gentleman has made that point, and I do not think that the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett) will take exception or cavil if I say that she made a similar point at an earlier stage in our proceedings. It is a point that has also been previously made by the Father of the House, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). They do have long experience, they do know what they are talking about, and it might be a good idea to have a degree of calm and a readiness to heed their wise advice.
Leaving the EU: No Deal

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

Mr Speaker: I now call Keir Starmer to make an application for leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has up to three minutes in which to make such an application.

4.10 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing time to hear this application for an emergency debate on a specific and important matter—namely, that this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet’s decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit following the Prime Minister’s failure to allow this House promptly to express its view on the Government’s deal in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

Yesterday, the Government announced an additional £2 billion of spending to prepare for leaving the European Union without a withdrawal agreement. They have done so after denying the House the opportunity to express its view on the Government’s deal or its view on leaving the European Union without a deal, by deferring the meaningful vote originally scheduled for Tuesday 11 December. If that vote had been held, I have no doubt that the Government’s deal would have been roundly rejected, as would any proposal that we leave with no deal. No Government have the right to risk the wellbeing of the United Kingdom because of their own failed negotiations, and it is vital that the Government are held to account for their spending of public money, especially when the sums involved are so large and the stakes are so high. I therefore ask for this emergency debate to be held.

Mr Speaker: The right hon. and learned Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration under the terms of Standing Order No. 24—namely, the matter of the Cabinet’s decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit following the Prime Minister’s failure to allow this House promptly to express its view on the Government’s deal in the light of the significant public expenditure involved. I do not think that the right hon. and learned Gentleman quoted this, but it is right for me to quote it. I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I am satisfied that the matter raised is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Has the right hon. and learned Gentleman the leave of the House?

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): No! No! No!

Mr Speaker: The objection has been raised by the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), which is in conformity with our procedures. In those circumstances, if there is an objection it is necessary for at least 40 Members to rise in their places in the House in order to facilitate such a debate. It is I think clear that somewhat in excess of 40 Members are standing in the House.

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

I thank the hon. Member for Wellingborough, who has faithfully complied with our procedures, but the fact is that the House has, under our rules, decided that the debate is sought. I thank Members for doing so. The debate will take place immediately, and it would ordinarily do so for up to three hours but, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman will know, it has to conclude by the moment of interruption, so it will be a little less than three hours. It is right that he should now open the debate—[Interruption.] In fact, this will happen after we have heard the 10-minute rule motion, so it will be somewhat shorter. This will be a second go of the day, and a fuller opportunity for the hon. Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) to speak on this important matter.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Pound, calm yourself, man. I am sure that you have some witticism to share with a colleague, which will be of great interest to the said Member, but it could usefully be done outside the curtilage of the Chamber. The hon. Lady deserves the courtesy of the attention of the House, so I ask Members who wish to discuss other matters to do so elsewhere. We have just been talking about the need for respect. Let us show the hon. Lady respect as she introduces her ten-minute rule motion.
Defibrillators (Availability)

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

4.15 pm

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the provision of defibrillators in education establishments, and in leisure, sports and certain other public facilities; to make provision for training persons to operate defibrillators; to make provision for funding the acquisition, installation, use and maintenance of defibrillators; and for connected purposes.

This is my second attempt to bring in this Bill, as it fell last year when the general election was called. It is imperative that we push for the mandatory installation of these life-saving devices in our public buildings. As I said during Prime Minister’s questions, each and every week 12 young people die as a result of a sudden cardiac arrest. If they are in a shockable rhythm, around 80% of them could be saved by the use of a defibrillator.

The purpose of the Bill is therefore to increase rates of survival from cardiac arrest, as currently the UK’s record is dismal. According to the British Heart Foundation, almost 30,000 cardiac arrests a year happen outside hospitals, and less than 10% of those people survive. In fact, in some parts of England, the survival rate is as low as 2%. Behind each of those statistics are people, families and communities.

A cardiac arrest can happen for many reasons, from trauma right through to congenital heart defects, but if a person is in a shockable rhythm, using a defibrillator can increase their chances of survival by as much as 80%. However, for a defibrillator to be successful, quick access to it is essential, because minutes count. If too much time elapses, a shockable rhythm turns to a non-shockable rhythm and the chances of survival decrease rapidly. If a person’s heart is not restarted within four minutes, their chances of living are reduced by almost 80%. Even the speediest paramedic in the country would struggle to get to someone in four minutes. That is why having easy, accessible defibrillators is so crucial.

Across the UK, we have laws mandating the availability of other life-saving equipment, such as seatbelts, fire extinguishers and smoke alarms, but there is not a single piece of legislation requiring defibrillators, which could restart the hearts of 12 young people each week.

My passion for this subject was started by Jessica Batchelor, the former Young Mayor of Seaford in my constituency. At the age of 15, she witnessed at first hand a close family friend die of a sudden cardiac arrest, and no defibrillator was available. As the town’s Young Mayor, she raised thousands of pounds to ensure that there are defibrillators in Seaford, and she lobbied me as the local MP to do something about a change in the law. Councillor Merle Phillips in my other town of Poleygate is currently raising thousands of pounds, because the town is divided by a level crossing and only one side has a defibrillator.

The aim of the Bill is to ensure that schools, sports facilities and public buildings, in every town and village in the country, all have defibrillators as standard that can be accessed 24 hours a day. As the Prime Minister said during Question Time, residents tell me that they would be afraid to use a defibrillator and that they think they need training to do so, although nothing could be further from the truth. All a person has to do is to stick the two pads on someone’s chest and turn the machine on. The machine will tell them exactly what to do, without training, but people are afraid to use them. The Bill’s aim is not to state that only trained people should use defibrillators but to mandate training for local communities with every installation so that people feel confident to use them.

I wonder how many Members of Parliament here today know how many defibrillators are on the parliamentary estate. There are 28 in total, in the House of Lords, the House of Commons, Norman Shaw North, Portcullis House and two in the Elizabeth Tower, but do Members know where the nearest defibrillator is to us right now? According to the in-tranet, it is in Member’s Lobby, but it took me, a Doorkeeper and a member of security four minutes to find it this morning. It is in a cupboard with no sign, and no one knew it was there. Those four minutes could cost someone’s life.

I will share the difference a defibrillator can make. This morning, I heard from Stuart Freeman, a constituent of my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), whose daughter, aged just 18, suffered a cardiac arrest in March. She was given cardiopulmonary resuscitation and a defibrillator was available, and it saved her life. Serena has met my hon. Friend to plead the case for better training and for more access to defibrillators, and she is a great example of the difference defibrillators can make.

I therefore move that the Bill be introduced so we can mandate that defibrillators are installed across the whole UK in publicly accessible places and that training is available so that people know what to do in the event of a cardiac arrest and are not afraid to use defibrillators if they are needed. It is crucial to support the work of our many charities, such as the British Heart Foundation and St John Ambulance, to ensure we save as many lives as possible.

This week, 12 young people will die from a cardiac arrest, and 28,000 people will die from a cardiac arrest this year. Those lives could have been saved by the Bill, and I urge Members to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Jim Shannon, Stephen Twigg, Mr Edward Vaizey, Chris Green, Dr Philippa Whitford, Peter Aldous, Dr Lisa Cameron and Maria Caulfield present the Bill.

Maria Caulfield accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 25 January 2019, and to be printed (Bill 308).
Mr Speaker: Order. Before we proceed to the Standing Order No. 24 debate, I have now to announce the result of today’s deferred Divisions. In respect of the question relating to markets in financial instruments, the Ayes were 307 and the Noes were 215, so the Question was agreed to. In respect of the question relating to accounts and reports, the Ayes were 305 and the Noes were 216, so the Question was agreed to.

Leaving the EU: No Deal
Emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)

4.24 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet’s decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit, following the Prime Minister’s failure to allow this House promptly to express its views on the Government’s deal, in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

The background to this debate is well known. This House was due to vote on the Government’s deal on 11 December. The day before that vote, the Prime Minister pulled the vote, recognising that she was going to lose the vote, as she said, by “a significant margin” and saying that she wanted more time to “secure further assurances” on the backstop. I was in the House when the Prime Minister made her statement on 10 December, and in my view the majority were clearly against deferring the vote. No doubt for that reason the Prime Minister did not have the courage to put her decision to defer the meaningful vote to a vote, preferring instead for the Government not to move their own business.

The problem with the Prime Minister’s approach is obvious, which is why the majority were against deferring the vote. First, the Prime Minister is highly unlikely to get meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement. Secondly, unless meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement are made, the majority in this House are not likely to support her deal, whenever it gets put. That is a point bluntly accepted by the International Trade Secretary, who said recently:

“It is very difficult to support the deal if we don’t get changes to the backstop. I don’t think it will get through.”

The first problem about getting meaningful changes to the withdrawal agreement was laid bare last week. After informal talks on Monday and Tuesday of last week between the Prime Minister and other leaders, and then the EU summit on Thursday and Friday, the EU made its position clear. The President of the Commission said that there is “no room whatsoever for renegotiation”.

The Commission spokesperson said:

“The European Council has given the clarifications that were possible at this stage, so no further meetings with the UK are foreseen.”

The EU Council also made it clear that the withdrawal agreement is “not open for renegotiation”. That is why there have been such strong calls this week for the vote to be put back to this House this week.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Many of us, right hon. and hon. Members in this House, are becoming increasingly suspicious that the reason why this Brexit can is being kicked further and further down the road by the Prime Minister is to take us to the eleventh hour, and then hold the British public and parliamentarians in this House to ransom, saying, “It is my deal or no deal.” Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that that is a disastrous and reckless policy, which is not in our national interest?”

Keir Starmer: I do agree and I will elaborate on that in just a moment. The strong calls this week for the vote to be put this week are so that, the deal having been
defeated, as it inevitably will be, this House can get on with assessing what then are the available and achievable options for the future.

**Layla Moran** (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that if this were a company and we were living outside the Westminster bubble, in the real world, we would not be allowed to take Christmas holidays while such an existential crisis is happening to our country? Does he agree that we should all be put on standby by this Government so that at the first available minute we can have a vote on this important matter?

**Keir Starmer**: I certainly agree that we need the vote as soon as possible, and I really do think it should have been on 11 December—if not then, it should have been this week. To elaborate on the point just made, the only purpose now in deferring the vote until 14 January is to run the clock down, and to attempt to present the vote as a binary choice between the Prime Minister’s deal and no deal.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is deeply dangerous to use the sort of scare tactics we saw being briefed out from No. 10 this morning, when it was said that somehow 3,500 troops were going to be put on the street? I asked the Home Secretary repeatedly about that after his own permanent secretary had told me that there were no such plans for troops to be used at our borders. Somebody is not telling the truth here—it is either the briefings coming out of No. 10 or somebody else.

**Keir Starmer**: I share my hon. Friend’s concern and will elaborate on that point in just a minute. To build on that comment, as I have been saying for some time, I do not think for one moment that this House is going to accept the binary choice that the Prime Minister will attempt to put before us. A choice between bad and even worse is not a meaningful choice. Nor is leaving without a deal, because if we leave without signing the withdrawal agreement, there will be various deals? Would he welcome the agreement on the common transit convention? Would he welcome the air services agreement? Would he welcome the facilitation of trade agreement? There are going to be plenty of agreements so that we can trade perfectly successfully—will he stop his scaremongering?

**Keir Starmer**: I shall come to that point in a minute, but simply listing all the things that need to happen between now and 29 March to get to a so-called managed no deal only makes the point: it is not going to happen in the three months available.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the clock is now ticking and the Government need seriously to start to think about extending article 50 so that they can send in some decent negotiators to negotiate a deal? Or can we put this back to the British people in an election.

**Keir Starmer**: I do agree that serious consideration needs to be given to the timetable now set by article 50, because by 14 January we will be just nine weeks away from the proposed date of leaving the EU. On any view, the Government will then have to make a choice about what to do next. No plan B has ever been forthcoming. In the week or so before the deferral of the vote last week, the question everybody was asking was, “What is the Prime Minister’s plan B?” When she pulled the vote and ran away, we learned that she does not have a plan B. The Prime Minister will have to come to the Dispatch Box and make a statement about what she proposes happens next. If she stands at that Dispatch Box and says that she intends to take the UK out of the EU without a deal, I genuinely believe that Parliament—this House—will do everything that it can to stop that course of action.

**John Woodcock** (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Given that it is the only route that gives legal certainty to be able to stop no deal, can I take it from what my right hon. and learned Friend is saying that if we get to the end and the only thing to do is revoke article 50, the official Opposition would support that, alongside Government Members?

**Keir Starmer**: What I have said is that I genuinely think that the majority in this House is against no deal. One reason why I feel strongly that the vote should be put as soon as possible is that the discussion and the debate about what happens next need to happen sooner rather than later because they will take time. We need then to assess what the options are and to see where the consensus of the House is. All that is happening in this deferment of the vote for weeks is wasting the time of the House that should be spent on the question of how we prevent leaving without a deal.
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP) rose—

Keir Starmer: I will give way, but then I will make some progress.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. Let me congratulate him on achieving this important debate this afternoon. On the question of the extension of article 50, is he, like me, not hearing from interlocutors in the EU that the EU would be unlikely to grant an extension of the article 50 period for further negotiation, but that it would grant an extension of the article 50 period for either a general election or a people’s vote?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. As the hon. and learned Lady knows, I have had a number of discussions about the issue of extension with the Commission, the Council and various EU countries. The clear message from them is that the only basis for an extension would be if it was coupled with a good reason for the extension. Therefore, again, that is why we need to get on to the debate about what happens if and when this deal is voted down because these are very serious considerations.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that it is grotesque and obscene that we have a homelessness crisis in this country, which is visible right outside this building; elderly people not getting the care they need; special needs children not getting proper support; people waiting far too long for mental health support; and hospitals full up—all burning injustices—and this Conservative Government are spending billions of pounds preparing for a no deal, which is not necessary?

Keir Starmer: I do agree. I will be corrected if I am wrong, but I am given to understand that, tragically, one of those sleeping just outside the entrance and exit to this place died in the past 24 hours, and that underscores the point that has just been made.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): The words of the right hon. and learned Gentleman are that it is highly unlikely that there will be meaningful changes to this deal. If that is right, does he agree that it is vanishingly unlikely that a completely new deal along the lines that Labour, or indeed anyone else, might propose would also be agreed by the 29 March timetable? If that is right, and if it is also right that the EU would not extend article 50 to renegotiate a new deal, it effectively means that, by not supporting this deal, the Labour party risks becoming the handmaiden to no deal, and that is a real concern, does he not agree?

Keir Starmer: No, I do not accept that. I have had more conversations with people in Brussels than probably most people in this House about the question—the very important question—of what the position would be if the red lines that the Prime Minister laid down were different. The EU’s position in private is confidential. Its position in public has been repeated over and again. It has said that if the red lines had been different, a different negotiation could have happened. If the logical conclusion to the hon. Gentleman’s point is that we on these Benches must simply support whatever the Prime Minister brings back because no deal is worse, then that is an extraordinary position. It means that there is no critical analysis and no challenge even if it is a bad deal, or the wrong deal for the country, and that, somehow, we must support it because of this binary choice, and we will not do so.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. and learned Friend is making a very powerful speech about the absurd lack of leadership from the Government on this critical issue facing our country. Does he recognise that a cross-party letter, which was published on Monday and organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), has confirmed that, indeed, 19 Members on the Government Benches support ruling out a no-deal option in the national interest? Therefore, it is a matter of mere arithmetic that there is certainly no support for a no-deal crash out of the European option in this House. It is the duty of this Government to come to this House immediately and reflect the wishes of Parliament.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, and I agree with it.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab) rose—

Keir Starmer: I am not sure that I am making a speech; I think that I am responding to interventions. I will take one more and then I really will make some progress.

Wayne David: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend. Does he agree that it is significant that, this morning, the new First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, had a meeting with the Prime Minister and told her very clearly that she had a moral obligation to make sure that this country did not leave the EU without a deal?

Keir Starmer: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will take further interventions when I have made some progress.

The point that I am really making is that leaving the EU on 29 March next year without a deal is simply not viable, and I do not think that any responsible Government would do it.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Will my right hon. and learned Friend give way?

Keir Starmer: I will give way in a moment.

Treasury estimates of a no-deal outcome would mean a 9.3% decline in GDP over 15 years. That would be an act of economic self-harm that no responsible Government should take. It would see every region of the UK worse off and would mean that there would be no common security arrangements in place and, of course, a hard border in Northern Ireland. In any event, the truth is that the Government simply have not prepared for it and it is now too late.

Let me give two very specific but obvious examples. Over the summer, the previous Brexit Secretary published 106 technical notices—the Government’s view of what needed to be done in order to prepare for no deal. What comes out of those 106 documents is that, taken together, they commit the Government to the creation or expansion of 15 quangos, further legislation in 51 areas, the negotiation of 40 new international agreements with the EU or
others, and the introduction of 55 new systems and processes. That is the Government’s own analysis of what they need to do to prepare for no deal. Let us just stand back and consider that. The meaningful vote is scheduled for the week of 14 January. It is then just over nine weeks to 29 March. It is simply not credible to pretend that even the bare minimum in the Government’s own technical notices can be delivered in that nine weeks.

The second example is just so powerful. Two weeks ago today, the Chancellor answered a question from the hon. Member for Dover (Charlie Elphicke) about preparations at Dover, which is a pretty busy port—the busiest. Some of us have been down there a number of times to talk to the staff and management about what needs to be done, and they are very worried. This is what the Chancellor said:

“If we were to end up having a WTO-type trading arrangement with the European Union”,

that

“would involve some very significant infrastructure works that could not be done in a matter of months; they would take years to complete.”

However much money we throw at it now, how can we get over that problem—that the infrastructure at Dover will take years, not months? The Chancellor did not say that it would take months if there was more money; he said years, not months. The idea that we could somehow manage a no deal nine weeks after the meaningful vote only has to be put against that example to be seen to be ridiculous. This was confirmed by the National Audit Office, which said bluntly in October:

“The government does not have enough time to put in place all of the infrastructure, systems and people required for fully effective border operations on day one”.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Is the right hon. and learned Gentleman aware that the non-disclosure agreements that were stopping officials sharing with business the Government’s plans for no deal were lifted—I think it was only last week—to enable businesses to be aware of what the Government were planning for in relation to no deal?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention; I heard that point made earlier in a point of order. My hon. Friend underscores not just the concern about that very issue but the fact that the Government should have made a statement today about no-deal preparations. It is unsatisfactory that we have had to go through this process just to get a debate. There should have been a statement so that Members could then ask specific questions of the Government about exactly those sorts of issues.

If anyone thinks that the EU is going to ride to the rescue and put in place a raft of reciprocal side deals, or waive their rules and laws for the UK, I would encourage them to read the EU’s plans for no deal, which were updated and published only at lunchtime today. On contingency measures, the EU says that they will only be taken where strictly necessary and in the interests of the Union, and they can be revoked by the EU at any time. This is what a no-deal exit looks like. On information and data exchange, it says that work strands are in place such as the disconnection and adaption of databases and IT systems and other platforms for communication and information exchange to which the United Kingdom should no longer have access. On air transport, it says that UK air carriers will not be able to conduct EU-to-EU flights. On road haulage, it says that a permit system would allow for considerably less traffic than currently takes place between the Union and the United Kingdom. On goods, it says that all relevant EU legislation on imported goods and exported goods will apply after 29 March. That means customs checks, declarations, and origin tests. It means a raft of checks on agriculture. It means severe friction, and it comes nine weeks after the meaningful vote.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that it is utterly irresponsible of the Prime Minister to threaten Members of Parliament into a deal or a no-deal situation, given what is happening, and given the dangers and risks? She is playing Russian roulette with people’s lives and livelihoods, and she will be responsible for causing chaos in this country if she does not rule it out right now, before we go into recess.

Keir Starmer: I agree wholeheartedly. I cannot believe that the analysis that the Opposition have undertaken is not the same as that undertaken by the Government. They know very well that no deal is not viable and they know very well the risks involved, and that calls into question the decisions that were made yesterday.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Indeed, we have heard evidence in the Exiting the EU Committee that we could see a delay of two to three years in new medicines coming to the UK if the Government proceed as they intend. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that while the cost to businesses is now being talked about far more openly, there is a real cost to our citizens, with a leaked Department for Work and Pensions report suggesting that the Government are planning a strategy to deal with potential rising homelessness, poverty and suicide? Is this not a horrific place for our country to have reached, and far removed from what people thought they were voting for?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention; I heard that point made earlier in a point of order. My hon. Friend underscores not just the concern about that very issue but the fact that the Government should have made a statement today about no-deal preparations. It is unsatisfactory that we have had to go through this process just to get a debate. There should have been a statement so that Members could then ask specific questions of the Government about exactly those sorts of issues.

If anyone thinks that the EU is going to ride to the rescue and put in place a raft of reciprocal side deals, or waive their rules and laws for the UK, I would encourage them to read the EU’s plans for no deal, which were updated and published only at lunchtime today. On contingency measures, the EU says that they will only be taken where strictly necessary and in the interests of the EU, they should not replicate the benefits of membership of the Union, and they can be revoked by the EU at any time. This is what a no-deal exit looks like. On information and data exchange, it says that work strands are in place such as the disconnection and adaption of databases and IT systems and other platforms for communication and information exchange to which the United Kingdom should no longer have access. On air transport, it says that UK air carriers will not be able to conduct EU-to-EU flights. On road haulage, it says that a permit system would allow for considerably less traffic than currently takes place between the Union and the United Kingdom. On goods, it says that all relevant EU legislation on imported goods and exported goods will apply after 29 March. That means customs checks, declarations, and origin tests. It means a raft of checks on agriculture. It means severe friction, and it comes nine weeks after the meaningful vote.
Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Coming towards Christmas, I am sure that Members across the House will have people coming into their surgeries, as I have: the mum and son who lost their jobs because of Brexit and were referred to the food bank; the dad who came on another issue, breaking down, weeping and saying, “I’m having counselling, I’m on anti-depressants”, because of a no deal Brexit—he is paying workers and he is worried about their mortgages and their Christmas. When we start worrying about stockpiling food, we know that only the poorest suffer who cannot afford to stockpile and cannot afford the most expensive food. I am sure that does not happen in the restaurants in Mayfair. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree?

Keir Starmer: I do agree. I am sure that Members across the House have had concerned constituents coming up to them in advice surgeries, or on buses and trains and in the street, expressing their concern about the state of politics, the place we have got to in these negotiations, and the prospect of no deal. It is not often that members of the public talk about politics in the way that they are doing at the moment. They are talking about it in a very anxious state because they realise just how badly these negotiations have gone.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I do not think the Government accept the level of chaos that this will provide. My Ford factory has 24 deliveries of parts a day. If one of those lorries does not arrive, the factory will have to stop production for a day, which means a loss of half a million pounds. Zimmer Biomet makes knee and hip replacements and sends all its products from the Netherlands, which arrive in our hospitals on the day of surgery. It cannot guarantee that if the lorries are not coming through. There will be chaos in every aspect of life in this country.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that powerful point, and it applies to the whole of manufacturing. In the last two years, I have tried to visit all the major manufacturers across the UK and see for myself the systems they are running. Automobile manufacturing is a classic example, with goods coming in from the EU all the time. Those goods are tracked, so that it is known to the hour when they will arrive. In some operations, the components arrive four hours before they go on the production line. That is why any interruption of the current arrangements poses a real threat to manufacturing and why what is said about Dover not being ready for years, not months, is significant for manufacturing.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend is making an extremely powerful case. Does he share my puzzlement—nay, exasperation—that some people in government and on the Government Benches appear to think that they know more and better about the implications of no deal than the businesses that make things, export things, import things and transport things? Those businesses have formed a queue to meet all of us, and no doubt Ministers, to express their concern about what this will mean. Does that not show just how irresponsible it is of the Government to suggest that this could happen?

Keir Starmer: I could not agree more. I have spoken to hundreds of businesses across the whole of the UK, either one on one or in small groups—I am not talking about halls full of businesses—and I have not come across any business that says that no deal could be a satisfactory outcome. Anybody who suggests that businesses in some way would support that approach needs to point me to the businesses they have been talking to, because I have obviously been talking to lots of businesses that they are not talking to. In every case, when they lay out their concerns to me, I faithfully ask them whether they have said the same to the Government, and I ask them to say the same to me as they say to the Government. On a number of occasions, I have made it my business, in a friendly way, to point the Brexit Secretary to businesses that have talked to me and suggest he has a conversation with them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress, because I have given way many times.

The point is this, and it has come out through all the interventions: there is no such thing as a managed no deal. That is why I have repeatedly said that no deal is not credible and not viable. It is a political hoax intended only to put pressure on Members of this House to back the Prime Minister’s deal.

Yesterday, instead of trying to find a viable way of getting a deal through the House, the Cabinet agreed to ramp up no-deal preparations, notwithstanding all the valid points that have been made. An additional £2 billion of taxpayers’ money has been allocated to that, which includes half a billion pounds to the Home Office, £400 million to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and £200 million for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. That funding will be welcomed by some in the European Research Group.

However, let us look at the reaction of businesses. The biggest customs firm inside Dover told “Channel 4 News” yesterday that crashing out of the EU without a deal would create “Armageddon” for the UK. That is business speaking. That is what it said to “Channel 4 News”. It is not me or anybody in this House; it is businesses that are running Dover telling us what they think the outcome would be. Five British business groups, including the Confederation of British Industry, said this morning:

“it is clear there is simply not enough time to prevent severe dislocation and disruption in just 100 days.”

That is the voice of business.

No wonder it is reported that there was considerable conflict of views around the Cabinet table. The Justice Secretary is reported to have told the Cabinet that a managed no deal is not a viable option. He apparently added that

“the responsibility of Cabinet ministers is not to propagate unicorns but to slay them.”

The Work and Pensions Secretary is reported to have told the Cabinet:

“Just because you’ve put a seatbelt on, it doesn’t mean you should crash the car.”

I agree with them. The first duty of the Government is to protect the public, and a no-deal Brexit would put the public at risk. That is not scaremongering; it is reality.

Even if the Government did choose to push ahead with a no deal, I am convinced that Parliament would stand in their way. The overwhelming majority of Members
in this House would not countenance a no deal Brexit. I pay tribute to the, I think, now three hon. Members opposite who have already said that they would quit the Conservative party if the Government pressed ahead with no deal. I suspect that they are not alone. No Government have the right to plunge the country into chaos because of their own failure, and this Parliament will not let them.

**Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab):** I am not so sure that the Government grasp the seriousness of this situation. There are 800,000 jobs in the automobile industry alone at stake and about 300,000 in the west midlands, so we have to get some sort of deal, but not the deal that these are proposing. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree about that?

**Keir Starmer:** I do agree, and at this stage of the negotiations, what I think should happen is that the deal should be put to a vote and the vote taken, and then we should have a grown-up conversation about what the real options are and stop pretending that some sort of managed no deal is the default position. It is not, and this House will never accept that it is the default position.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** My right hon. and learned Friend has said several times—and I understand why—that this House will not allow the Government to proceed on the basis of no deal, but one of the difficulties that we have, as we have seen over the last fortnight, is that the power of the Government to manage the business and completely ignore any motions of this House that are not legally binding is quite phenomenal. Do we not need to address that inherent problem in our system if we are really going to have a chance of success?

**Keir Starmer:** That is a very powerful point, and what the last few weeks have shown are some of the inadequacies in the procedures of this House. The idea that the Government can simply not move their business and do not have to have a vote on it is not acceptable. The fact that we have to have an SO 24 debate on an issue of this significance, because we cannot force a statement, shows the inadequacies.

The only other thing I would say on that very important point is this: given that there have to be at least 51 changes to legislation—even on the Government’s own analysis—under the 106 technical notices, there will be opportunities for amendments in this House, unless the Prime Minister says, “I am simply not going to take any business until April, of any sort whatsoever.” I do not think that this Prime Minister would do that. I knew her when she was Home Secretary and I was Director of Public Prosecutions. I know how seriously she takes security and counter-terrorism issues. I do not think that this Prime Minister would try to force no deal on this House without the necessary precautions—even on her own case—with legislation.

**Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op):** Given the experience that we had just over a week ago, what guarantees do we have that the Prime Minister will not, on 10 or 11 January, decide that she has some sign from the European Union that might mean that she will get the better deal at that point that she has not managed to get in the meantime, and then pull the vote yet again?

**Keir Starmer:** Well, we have no guarantees. Like everybody else, I heard various Members of the Prime Minister’s Cabinet on the radio on the morning of 10 December assuring all listeners and viewers that the vote was 100% guaranteed for the next day, only for it to be pulled at the last minute.

Having shadowed three Brexit Secretaries this year alone, I know as well as anyone that the House has been consumed by Brexit. However, at the end of the year, let us look at where we are. We have a Prime Minister unable to put her deal to the vote and no prospect of further renegotiation. Rather than trying to reach across Parliament to break the deadlock, we have a Government who are now actively pursuing a policy that is not supported by the Cabinet, not supported by Parliament and not supported by the country. It is reckless and irresponsible. It is an indictment of a wasted year. Even now, I urge the Government to take no deal off the table and find a sensible way forward.

4.59 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Chris Heaton-Harris):** From the start, this Government have been clear that we do not expect or want a no-deal scenario. Delivering the deal negotiated with the European Union remains our top priority. It is also the best way to deliver on the democratic choice of the British people and the best way to deliver certainty to businesses and the people of our country.

**Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab):** Will the Minister give way?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I will make some progress, but then I will give way.

Our efforts to get this deal have not changed. However, with 100 days until we leave the European Union, the Government’s continued duty is to prepare for every eventuality, including a no-deal scenario. This is because—like it or not—no deal remains a risk if this House does not support the Prime Minister’s deal.

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** Does the Minister not accept, having heard in recent days from so many businesses and organisations around the UK, that they speak with a unified voice? Whether it be the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Engineering Employers Federation, the British Chambers of Commerce or the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry, they are all unified in their position, which is that no deal is not acceptable and we cannot plan it. Does he not therefore accept that this is just a negotiating ploy—a charade that the Prime Minister is leading us on—and that all the time this is costing our businesses greatly and leading to uncertainty and to a loss of jobs?

**Chris Heaton-Harris:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I have to say that the businesses I have visited all wanted people in this House to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal because that gives them the certainty that they require.

**Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD):** Is it not true, however, that if businesses were given a real choice, they would actually prefer to stay in the European Union altogether? The only argument that the Prime Minister is putting forward is that the people have voted but, in that
majority vote of 17.4 million, a considerable number of people voted to leave the European Union without any deal. If the Government are finally to put that fantasy to bed, it would look entirely different if we put the vote back to the people, which is what we should do anyway.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I get the feeling that the hon. Lady would not accept the result of a referendum that went against her in any shape or form. I am afraid I just say that the Prime Minister has negotiated a very good deal for this country, so the best way to guarantee certainty to businesses and the people of our country is to vote for that deal.

Ruth George: The businesses I have spoken to in Brexit summits in my constituency have said that the deal on the table from the Prime Minister gives no certainty whatsoever. It is simply a stopgap until the end of 2020. After that, the future declaration is not legally binding and we will not even have the same Prime Minister in place to negotiate and deliver it. It is the worst of all possible worlds.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have to disagree with the hon. Lady. I have met plenty of businesses. Indeed, the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) on the Opposition Front Bench and I share a very big manufacturing business called Cummins, which is a very strong advocate for certainty in this area and has written to hon. Members asking us to vote for the deal.

Mr Sweeney: The Minister mentions the need for certainty. Let us create some degree of certainty now and route out the disastrous proposition of a no deal. Under no circumstances can the Government allow it. At least 19 of his Tory colleagues agree that no deal cannot be a proposition that can ever be enacted by this Government. Therefore, just rule it out now and provide some degree of certainty to business at least.

Chris Heaton-Harris: The best way to route out a no deal is to vote for the deal we have on the table.

Extensive work to prepare for this has been under way for over two years. It was commenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) when he was in my role.

Dr Whitford: I have to say that the Minister was quite cheeky to me. I, on 6 December, in telling me to google the French Government’s plans. Will he take the opportunity now to reassure the president and the deputy president of the Royal College of Radiologists, and indeed radiologists, cancer specialists and their patients up and down the UK on the provision of a safe supply of medical radioisotopes, which simply cannot be stockpiled?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and I apologise to her if I was cheeky on that particular day, but I understood that she would not believe a Minister of the Crown at this Dispatch Box when articulating what is going to happen to mitigate any problems with flow on the French side of the short straits.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab) rose—

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP) rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I give way to the hon. Member for Glenrothes, whom I mentioned.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me to intervene after he mentioned the factory in my constituency. I visited that factory and met staff on Friday. I wonder whether he would share with the House what Cummins said to him about the prospect of a no deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris: Yes, I certainly can. They do not want a no deal; they want a negotiated deal and they have written to Members of this House, asking them to accept the deal that is on the table.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I give way to the Chair of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union.

Hilary Benn: I thank the Minister for giving way. Members of the Committee are looking forward to taking evidence from him on no-deal planning on the Wednesday after we get back from recess. May I ask him a question about facts? No deal will mean that we lose preferential access to our nearest, largest and most important trading partners—the other countries of the EU, and the 70 countries to which we have access because of the 40 deals that the EU has negotiated. What assessment have the Government made of the additional cost to businesses of the customs declarations and rules of origin certificates that those businesses that export at the moment under that preferential access do not even have to think about, but will have to start making arrangements for the day after 29 March? How much will it cost them and what will it do to their viability?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I very much look forward to coming before the right hon. Gentleman’s Committee in the early part of the new year. I would refer him to the partnership pack. It is online, on gov.uk. There are 100 pages of what businesses need to do to make sure that they conform with any new processes that might be required in a no-deal circumstance and the elements of cost that are associated with them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: May I continue for one moment? Then I will happily give way to everyone.

Seema Malhotra rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Lady is a very persistent member of the Committee.
Seema Malhotra: Further to that point on the 40-plus trade deals that the EU has with 70 other countries, which many of our businesses will be trading with currently under preferential terms, accounting for about £150 billion of trade each year, those are set to fall straight after we leave the European Union, particularly if there is no deal, and their future is uncertain even if we have a deal. What advice is the Minister giving those businesses about how they will be trading in future?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The Government are actually working to roll over all those deals, and the hon. Lady will see announcements in the coming days to deal with some of those points.

Mr Jim Cunningham: Have the Government looked at the costs that will result from our leaving the EU, whether in terms of commodities, pharmaceuticals or farming? Specifically, food prices are a big issue for the National Farmers Union, which I met a couple of weeks ago.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that he has long-standing concerns about what would happen in the case of a no deal, but I can honestly say to him that the best way to mitigate, to stop that problem happening, is to vote for the deal that is on the table.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris: No. I shall continue with my speech for a moment, if I may.

As I said about 20 interventions ago, extensive work to prepare for a no-deal scenario has been under way for two years; it commenced under the stewardship of my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe. For instance, we have already successfully passed critical legislation, signed international agreements, and guaranteed certain EU funding in a no-deal scenario. Further milestones will be reached and achieved in the coming days. Yes, Mr Deputy Speaker: this work continues, even during the recess period. Cabinet has now agreed to proceed with the Government’s next phase of no-deal planning. We have reached the point where we need to accelerate and intensify preparations, and this means we will set in motion our remaining no-deal plans, including finalising the international agreements and delivering the legislation we need.

Owen Smith: The Minister talks about accelerating the plans. Why does he not just acknowledge to the House that this is a £2 billion PR stunt? This has been completely exposed by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on the Opposition Front Bench as a hoax: a sham exercise trying to blackmail this House. The Minister knows—his own Government have acknowledged it—that it would cost our country 10% of GDP, or £200 billion a year, if we proceeded down this route. He does not want to be a part of a Government doing that to our country, does he?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point. On the £2 billion he talks about, that is preparing for both leaving with a deal and without a deal. The Government have to prepare for both eventualities and plans are well developed.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Is he trying to tell us that there are no extra costs in the preparations for no deal? Furthermore, can he confirm to the House today that none of the permanent secretaries, who are the accounting officers, at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Transport, the Department of Health and Social Care, HMRC, the Treasury and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy have said to Ministers that they require special authorisation, because Ministers are asking them to spend money that is not even in line with Government policy?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I did not say that none of the £2 billion was going to no deal in that situation, and I have not heard any claims relating to what the hon. Lady said in the second part of her intervention.

The Government’s plans are well developed and have been designed—

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith): I am most grateful to the Minister. I just wondered whether he would answer the point from my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith). Does the Minister admit that there is no majority in this House for no deal, that that is not going to pass and that, therefore, all he is doing is scaring businesses and scaring 5 million people, the EU citizens living in this country and UK citizens living in UK countries? Is that not political gamesmanship and an appalling way to treat people?

Chris Heaton-Harris: No. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I humbly point out to him that the House has passed legislation in this area and the best way to avoid no deal is to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal. If anybody is trying to scare people it would be people who are raising the fear in not voting for this deal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will happily give way to my friend, the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant: That’s me done for, isn’t it?

I honestly do not see how there is time enough, even if the Prime Minister’s deal were agreed on 14, 15 or 16 January, to get the implementation Bill in place in time for 29 March, so I am sure the Government are going to have to revoke article 50. My biggest anxiety, however, is that, if there is no deal, am I right in saying that we will, from the day after 29 March, no longer be a member of the European arrest warrant? We will, therefore, have no extradition agreement with any of the other countries in Europe from that day. Is that not putting this country’s security at risk?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman raises sensible points, but I can say to him that the best way to mitigate all those things is to vote for the deal that is on the table.

Our plans are well developed and have been designed to provide flexibility to respond to a negotiated agreement, as well as preparing us for the eventuality of leaving without a deal.
Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I will just carry on for a couple more minutes and then I will happily give way to all those standing.

At the heart of the Government’s approach to preparing for a no-deal scenario is a commitment to prioritise stability for citizens, consumers and business, to ensure smooth operations of business infrastructure and public services, and to minimise any disruption to the economy. As we said on 6 December, we have made a unilateral commitment to how citizens’ rights would work in a no-deal scenario. All European Union citizens who are resident in the UK by 29 March 2019 will be eligible to apply for settled status. They will be able to live, work and study as they did today. The basis for qualifying for status would be the same as proposed in a deal scenario. EU citizens would have until 31 December 2020 to obtain a status under the scheme. Once granted a status, EU citizens would be able to leave the UK for up to five consecutive years without losing their right to return.

We are pleased that the EU has today encouraged member states also to make a generous offer on citizens’ rights—this is a step in the right direction—but we hope that member states will now go further and guarantee this and that the EU will now open up engagement with us on other important issues. Let me be clear: a no-deal outcome and move to WTO terms, which some hon. Members have suggested would be preferable to a deal, would lead to disruption and potential harm to critical industries in the short term. We cannot solve the issues that may arise in a no-deal scenario, but we can, as a Government, mitigate them by prioritising continuity where possible. Indeed, continuity is a thread that runs through our no-deal plans.

Tom Brake: The Minister has just outlined all the risks associated with no deal. He needs now to discount and rule out no deal. No one on the Opposition Benches believes the Government will push that forward, and the Government will not succeed in convincing any Opposition Member that, because their no-deal option is so bad, the Prime Minister’s option is attractive. It is not, and we all know that.

Chris Heaton-Harris: As the right hon. Gentleman might have heard me say before, the best way to mitigate no deal is to vote for the deal on the table.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): We have said that the Minister must rule out no deal. Members across the Chamber from all parts of the UK are mindful of the devastating impact of Tory austerity on public services, and at this time he wants to spend billions more on no deal. He knows that no deal would devastate our public services even further. On that basis, will he rule out no deal?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The best way to mitigate no deal is to vote for the only deal on the table.

Stephen Kinnock: The key point about preparations for no deal is that it clearly takes two to tango. For example, we need to know what the French Government are doing about the port in Calais. The head of HMRC told the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union recently that the French Government were categorically not talking to him about Calais because they could not do so under the terms of article 50—bilateral contacts are not allowed—and the French Government have legislation stating that, in the case of the UK withdrawing from the EU without an agreement, British nationals and their family members residing in France would be staying illegally. Will the Minister please explain what he is doing to get the French Government to participate in his no-deal preparations?

Chris Heaton-Harris: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to the debate in the French Assembly only last week, he would have heard a French Minister say that the package to UK citizens living in France would be the most generous possible—(Interruption.) No, Madame Loiseau has said that on the record. He would also have heard that the number of border checkpoints at Calais would increase from two to 10, that a border inspection post would be built and that technology would also be used, with the sole purpose of ensuring the flow of goods across the Channel and the short strait.

It has always been our intention to accelerate no-deal preparations if needed as we neared Brexit day, although our hope has always been that we leave with a deal and that they will not be needed. Our communication with businesses and the wider public about a no-deal scenario will likewise increase as we approach our exit from the EU, until such time as we can be confident that planning for no deal is no longer needed. We now recommend that businesses also ensure they are prepared and enact their own no-deal plans as they judge necessary. In the coming weeks, and until the deal is secured and ratified by the House, we will also publish further advice on the steps that people, including UK nationals living in the EU and EU citizens living here in the UK, may need to take to prepare for our exit from the EU.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister says that no one wants no deal. I think that that is generally the considered view of the vast majority of the House, and it is not hard to see why. We see our constituents losing their jobs now. We see the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care spending money on fridges now. We see billions of pounds being spent on arguments about whether we are going to have the Army at the ports. We are in this position because of the way in which the Government have proceeded.

I know that this place is not given to introspection, but does the Minister accept any responsibility—for how it has come to this? Would the Minister care to say what he would have liked the Government to do differently, so that we could have avoided this? I promise him that if he just says that everybody should vote for his deal, people will laugh, but the public will be watching all of us and wondering what 2019 will bring, so will he please give a decent answer to our constituents?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I have to say that I think the decent answer is the one that the hon. Lady would expect from me. I hear what she is saying, I really do. I should love to have a moment of introspection—I should have loved to be in the negotiating room—but we now have on the table a very good deal for this country, and the best way to mitigate a no-deal scenario is to vote for that deal.
Nick Smith (Blenau Gwent) (Lab): The Government are very short of legislative time to prepare for no deal. Will the Minister outline the process for possibly extending article 50?

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is a matter of Government policy that we will not be revoking article 50.

As I said earlier, work preparing for no deal is not just starting now. As a responsible Government, we have spent more than two years making extensive preparations for all scenarios, including no deal. For instance, over the summer we published the 106 technical notices to which the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) referred. They contained, among many other items, guidance for the public on travelling to the EU, covering driving, passports, pet passports and flights; advice for businesses on various changes, including changes relating to data protection, copyright and intellectual property; and guidance for organisations that receive EU funding on how they can continue to receive it in a no-deal scenario.

Since then, we have taken further steps to ensure that people and businesses are ready. That has included publishing more than 100 pages of guidance for businesses on processes and procedures at the border in a no-deal scenario; contacting 145,000 businesses that trade with the EU, telling them to start getting ready for no-deal customs procedures; advising hundreds of ports of entry, traders, pharmaceutical firms and other organisations that use the border about the disruption that they might experience so that they can get their supply chains ready; and producing a paper on citizens’ rights, giving people clarity about their future and the fact that they will be able to continue to live their lives as they do now.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the Minister for giving way again. He is being extremely generous in taking interventions. The Speaker said earlier that there was no cap on repetition in the Chamber, but I think that he has won the award today.

My I gently say to the Minister that publishing documents day after day is not preparing this country? We are coming up to Christmas, and in three months we will leave the European Union. Businessmen are busy running their businesses and employing people, and we are approaching the end of the road. The Minister has said that it is not Government policy to extend article 50, but does he agree that it is legally possible to extend or, indeed, revoke it?

Mr Deputy Speaker (S. Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Many Members want to speak, and we are running out of time. The debate must finish at 7 pm, so please, let us be courteous to everyone.

Chris Heaton-Harris: It is Government policy that we will not revoke article 50, but I hear what the hon. Lady says. She will hear, in the coming days and weeks, why the Cabinet took the decision to increase the pace of our no-deal preparation, and she will hear a lot more about what the Government are doing, and what we are asking businesses to do, should we reach the unlikely point of a no-deal scenario.

Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield) (Lab): The Minister has made it very clear, on several occasions, that he thinks that the best way of avoiding the no-deal situation that he does not want to see is to vote for the deal. Does he accept that his preferred “best way” may not—indeed, is unlikely to—come to pass? Is he really telling the House that if, in his view, the best is not possible, the extent of his ambition, and the Government’s ambition, is to mitigate the disaster of no deal, when he has the option of avoiding it by ruling it out?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The hon. Gentleman is a sensible and long-standing Member of this House with great connections to the auto trade and many other businesses in his constituency, and I would like to think that he will be listening to them over the course of the next few weeks, and that perhaps he can be persuaded that the deal on the table is the best one for this country, for businesses and for certainty in this area.

Several hon. Members rose—

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am not going to give way again for another few seconds.

To answer a point raised by the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras, we have brought forward legislation that takes account of different scenarios, including the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018, the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, and the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Act 2018, and I am sure that a number of Members present today have sat diligently in Committees ensuring that the secondary legislation we require is well scrutinised. We are confident of the UK’s long-term prospects in all scenarios, and we will ensure that the public finances and the UK economy remain strong, and we have taken extensive steps to provide businesses and citizens with advice and guidance aimed at helping to mitigate the potential impacts of not having a deal.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister confirm or deny reports put out that the Army is on standby to slaughter thousands of lambs in the event of a no deal? We put that to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs at the Select Committee and he said he had no knowledge of this. I therefore wonder whether this is No. 10 putting out scare stories to scare us into this deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I think it might be the hon. Gentleman who is making things up.

The Government are also ensuring that staff have the correct training and skills to undertake this preparation effectively, and we are confident of the UK’s long-term prospects in all scenarios. More than 10,000 civil servants are working on Brexit with a further 5,000 in the pipeline, which will allow us to accelerate our preparation as necessary, and hopefully for a deal.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Sir Nick Carter said on “The Andrew Marr Show” on 11 November when asked if the Army would be involved in the distribution of food and medicines: “We’re not involved in that, no. We’re involved in thinking hard about what it might involve.”

So will the Minister tell us now what the Government intend to do with the troops they are planning to use?
Chris Heaton-Harris: The Government have no intention of using troops in our no-deal planning at all. To be absolutely clear, our priority remains delivering the deal we have negotiated with our European partners.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): The Minister is being very gracious in giving way to a large number of Members. He mentioned many different sectors and has referred to many colleagues’ questions about them. My question is about the health service and in particular my local hospital, the Royal Berks in Reading. Some 12.5% of the staff of the hospital come from the EU, including many doctors, nurses and other clinicians. They are seriously concerned about the prospect of no deal, and, at a time when the NHS is losing many valuable staff, recruitment and retention are a serious issue for the service. It is facing its greatest winter crisis for many years. Surely the Minister can look into this issue and provide greater reassurance. Ultimately I believe that it is the most overwhelming argument for the Government to reject the prospect of no deal.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s heartfelt concerns, but I point him to the Government announcement earlier in December that guarantees for the people he is rightly concerned about, and who work so hard for us all in our health service and our other sectors, the rights and assurances they deserve.

Chris Bryant: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Heaton-Harris: I am afraid not. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman is the one person in the House I can say that to: no.

We are confident of the UK’s long-term prospects in all scenarios, and we will ensure that the public finances and the UK economy remain strong, but with our EU exit approaching, we are accelerating our preparations as planned. It is the responsible thing to do, and we ask and recommend that people and businesses across the UK take the actions they judge to be necessary to be ready for leaving on 29 March next year.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I commend the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), for securing this debate, and I earnestly hope that we can work together, along with a number of Government Members and with other parties here, to try to stop this madness altogether, but we cannot forget that the position we are now in was entirely foreseeable when Parliament gave the Prime Minister unconditional authorisation to trigger article 50. Disastrous failing has undoubtedly followed disastrous failing on the part of Her Majesty’s Government at every stage in the process, but there has also been a disastrous failing on the part of Her Majesty’s loyal Opposition. When they needed to oppose, they singularly failed to do so—with, I stress, some honourable exceptions.

I do not propose to spend much time on a line-by-line analysis of the £4 billion that has already been taken away from our health service, our police, our local authorities and other essential services to pay for the Government’s incompetence, because, although that is an eyewatering sum in anyone’s book, it is peanuts compared with the true cost of a no-deal Brexit, or indeed any kind of Brexit at all. I just want to draw attention to one line of that departmental allocation. It is not the biggest sum, by any stretch of the imagination, at less than 0.5% of the total, but to me it is the one that should warn us not to go anywhere near a no-deal Brexit at any circumstances. We know that £16 million extra has been allocated to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. I hope that no one in this Chamber can avoid a shudder at hearing that. A no-deal Brexit means that we need an additional £16 million for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. What do the Government think it is for? I can tell the House that it is not for extra traffic wardens.
I am astonished that we should ever need to remind anyone of what is at stake in Northern Ireland if we leave without a deal that secures the permanent status of the peace process, yet only two days ago, the Democratic Unionist party spokesperson on Brexit, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), asked the Prime Minister:

"Would it not be far better to walk away now with £39 billion in her pocket and with her hands free"?—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 548.]

No, it would not. The vast majority of the people in Northern Ireland are saying just now, “Do not walk away with no deal in any circumstances whatsoever.” The price that Northern Ireland would have to pay for a no-deal Brexit cannot be measured in sums of money, but if it could, it would be well in excess of £4 billion.

The Government’s motivation for suddenly turning up the heat on no deal is as transparent as it is manipulative. They know that they cannot get a majority in Parliament for the Prime Minister’s deal. Instead of accepting that and seeking to build a consensus that could get parliamentary support, which incidentally is something the Prime Minister of a minority Government should have been doing from day one, at the last minute the Government are seeking to coerce Parliament—some people might go as far as to say that they are seeking to blackmail Parliament—into voting for the Prime Minister’s deal by making no deal the only other option.

The Prime Minister still insists that no deal is the only alternative, but that is not true, and we know from her own words that it is not true. She has tried the usual negotiating tactics. For example, when someone negotiates with two different sets of people in different directions, they put them in separate rooms and give the first set a scare story to persuade them to move towards them, and then they give the second set a scare story to persuade them to do the same. However, the Prime Minister made the mistake of telling everyone the same scare story at the same time. In the Chamber, when everyone was here, she warned the no-Brexit brigade in her own party. “If you don’t vote for this deal, there will be no deal.” Then she warned the no-deal brigade, “If you don’t vote for this deal, there will be no Brexit.”

The Prime Minister has put three options on the table. When we come to a meaningful vote, whether in this place or whether the public get a say, the third option of not leaving must be put back on the table. If she thought for one second that her deal would get more support in this House, or among the citizens of these four nations, than not leaving at all, she would be the first to put that question to a vote. The reason she will not ask the people again about Brexit is that she knows what the answer would be.

There have always been other options, but the Prime Minister has been too blinkered and dogmatic to recognise that they existed. Compromises were available. Some were offered two years ago by the Scottish Government, but she paid so little attention that I think she has forgotten they even existed. She must have forgotten that they existed, because when she came here to present her deal and said, “Nobody has ever put forward an alternative option,” she of course spoke in good faith—because everybody who speaks in Parliament does so in good faith. The only explanation must be that this document, presented to her by the national Government of one of our four nations, meant so little to her that she forgot it even existed.

Dr Whitford: Was not the Prime Minister’s fatal mistake to have painted herself into a corner with red lines before doing the first impact assessment, because otherwise she could have looked at what the best alternative was?

Peter Grant: I accept that is one of the disastrous mistakes the Prime Minister has made. We must remember that over the past few weeks, while the Government kept telling us, “But everyone in Europe has said that this is the only deal possible,” what they said was, “This is the only deal possible, given the firm negotiating stance that the United Kingdom has set.” That has been made perfectly clear, and I have no doubt that the Government have been told that by their contacts in Europe as well. Had the Prime Minister not painted herself into a corner with the stupid and unnecessary red lines, she would now have a much more workable deal that might well have got the acceptance if not the support of a significantly greater number of Members of this House.

One of the many examples of the almost despotic arrogance that we have seen from the Prime Minister is the fact that she, and she alone, appears to know exactly what was in the minds of the 17.5 million people when they put their mark against “Leave” on the ballot paper. None of us can know that for certain. I would never have the arrogance to say that I know what was in someone else’s mind, which is why I never call into question the motivations or integrity of those who happened to vote a different way from me. None of us can know for certain, but does anyone seriously believe that even a tiny fraction of those 17.5 million people voted for lower living standards, for food shortages, for the possibility that patient safety, and even patients’ lives, will be put at risk as a result of difficulties in getting essential medical supplies to them, for the possibility of troops on the streets to quell violent civil disorder, or for the likelihood of God only knows what for the future of Northern Ireland? I do not know what those 17.5 million people voted for, but I would be astonished if anything more than a tiny fraction voted for that kind of nightmare scenario, all of which is taken either from official Government statements or from unofficial and unattributable Government briefings.

Wera Hobhouse: I have said that again and again. Some 17.4 million people voted to leave the European Union. As we know from Government Members, within that leave vote people are split. So can the Government tell us—I would be interested in the hon. Gentleman’s views—how many of those 17.4 million people voted to leave without a deal and how many voted for the deal that the Prime Minister has brought back? Taken together, when we consider the split in the leave vote, the majority of people are actually for staying in the European Union, which is why we need a people’s vote.

Peter Grant: The referendum was a choice between one very definite answer on one side and an infinite number of possibilities on the other. One of my hon. Friends said at the time, “We know people have voted to leave, but we have no idea where they have voted to go.” The Prime Minister quickly shut down that discussion by defining what people had decided to do, and then she has the cheek to tell us that we are somehow being anti-democratic if we think perhaps the 17.5 million people voted for something else.
Deidre Brock: Does my hon. Friend agree that the first EU referendum was won on a tissue of lies, undeliverable promises and illegalities and that we should undo the rough wooing of the Brexit referendum and rededicate the decision to the people?

Peter Grant: There is no doubt at all that the EU referendum, as well as having the biggest participation of UK citizens in any democratic test, was also the most corrupt and most dishonest there has ever been and, I sincerely hope, we will ever see. Revelations are still coming out, even today, about the illegalities, some of which I suspect will never be brought to account. The penalties imposed on those who corrupt the democratic process are puny compared with what happens to a person who is found to have attempted to corrupt the full course of justice, so there is clearly a question that has to be addressed in future legislation.

We know that the calamitous effects of no deal are not what the majority of leave voters voted for.

Tom Brake: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Peter Grant: Not just now.

It is not what they were promised either in the Government’s information or by the leave campaign. It is not what they voted for, and I believe it is the absolute duty of this Parliament and of this Government to make sure it is not what they get. It would be an unpardonable dereliction of duty for the Government, or anyone else, deliberately to use the procedures of this House in such a way as to maximise the danger of the worst possible outcome, the least-favoured outcome, simply because it is the only conceivable way to deliver an outcome that the Prime Minister has decided she wants but which practically nobody else in this Parliament wants.

In the past few days, as was mentioned earlier, a number of Conservative MPs have said publicly that they are likely to resign the party whip if it looks as though the Prime Minister is herding us towards a no-deal Brexit. I would not want to see anyone put in that position.

I have respect for a number of Conservative MPs—for most Conservative MPs, in fact—even though I disagree with them, and I do not think any of them will hand back their party card easily or with a light heart, but think about it. It would not need many more Tory MPs to do that before suddenly, even with the Democratic Unionist party, the Government no longer have a working majority. There is already a motion of no confidence in the Government on the Order Paper, and it would take only one signature on that motion, and a few more people in the Conservative party to decide to put the countries of this Union before narrow party advantage, and suddenly the entire Government, not just the Prime Minister, would find that their jaikets were on the line. Suddenly the entire Government, not just the Prime Minister, would find that their jaikets were on the line. Suddenly the entire Government, not just the Prime Minister, would find that their jaikets were on the line.

Ultimately, whatever voting procedure the Government decide to use whenever, if ever, we get to that vote, Parliament will be faced with a choice between two final options, and no deal cannot be one of them. Think about what happens in, to take a random example, a Conservative party leadership election. I understand that quite a few Conservative Members had reason to check the rules recently. If there are more than two candidates, they go through a series of eliminations, with the least supported candidate dropping off at the end of each round and the election finishing with a run-off between the two most supported candidates.

If that process is good enough to pick a temporary, sometimes extremely temporary, leader of the Conservative party, why cannot we do it for the most important peacetime decision these islands have ever taken? If we did that, no deal would be off the table before we started, which would ease a lot of the concerns that the Government are now quite deliberately fuelling.

Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman then confirm his support for my European Union (Revocation of Notification of Withdrawal) Bill, which I presented yesterday? The Bill would basically rule out no deal, and unless a deal is agreed in a public vote, we would stay in the EU.

Peter Grant: I think the hon. Gentleman knows the answer to that question, because I have co-sponsored his Bill, although if I had realised that that meant I was expected to be here to speak on his Bill on Burns Day next year, I might have thought other about it.

I do not think it is acceptable, and it will be forever held up as a mark of shame on this entire Parliament, that it is left to Opposition Back Benchers to try to use procedural methods to force the Government to allow Parliament to give the decision that Parliament wants to give, rather than trying to force Parliament to give a decision that we really do not want to give in preference to a decision that we really, really do not want to give. When it comes to a decision, by whatever process, it is not acceptable, it is anti-democratic and, in terms of sovereignty of the people of Scotland and the rights of the people of Northern Ireland, it is unconstitutional to force us into a situation where no deal is one of only two deals left on the table. No deal can be ruled out and should be ruled out. For all the parroting of this and other Ministers, it is not up to Parliament to take no deal off the table by accepting an unacceptable deal. It is up to the Government to take it off the table right now by saying that no matter what happens, they will not impose it on us and on everybody else.

When it comes to a final decision, the two options available to us have to be the ones most likely to be acceptable by as many MPs as possible, even if they are not supported by as many MPs as possible. I will not support anything that takes us out of the EU, but I might be willing, reluctantly, to accept something that is less disastrous than what we are faced with just now. The final choice cannot be between the Prime Minister’s deal and no deal. The combined Parliament of our four nations and the citizens of our four nations must be given a choice, and that choice, if it is to be a fair choice, can only be between the Prime Minister’s Brexit and no Brexit.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): I am not imposing this, but may I suggest that people speak for about five minutes, as I think we would then get everybody in before the end at 7?
5.46 pm

Mr Charles Walker (Broxbourne) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. The greatest political movement of the 20th century was undoubtedly the Labour party. It transformed that century; it came from nowhere and literally changed the landscape of this country. Its greatest Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, was educated 10 miles from where I live. So I have to ask the Labour party: what on earth is it doing at the moment? What on earth is it doing with the national interest? We have a Prime Minister who is breaking herself, duty bound to get a deal for this country that ensures we leave with a deal, yet the shadow Secretary of State is saying, “No matter what she brings back, the Opposition will reject it, but no deal is not an option.” I know some Labour Members spend a huge amount of time with their constituents, but surely they are hearing their constituents say, “Look, let’s just take what the Prime Minister is bringing back”—[Interruption.]/That is what they are saying. They are saying, “Let’s take what the Prime Minister is bringing back and let’s move on as a country.” I tell hon. Members that in January, when the Prime Minister presents her deal at the Dispatch Box, one that she has pursued tirelessly on behalf of this country without rest or break, and the Labour party votes against it and then says that no deal is not good enough, the people of this country will work out who is responsible for where we end up. It will not be Conservative Members; there will be a few on our Benches, but it will be Opposition Members, and they will pay the political price.

I have huge respect for the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), but he cannot camouflage his desire to see a second referendum. He has not got a clue. We then have this idea that the right hon. Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) and vote against the deal, but the public will not believe for a minute that it was done in the national interest. It will have been done in self-interest. The Labour party no longer cares about or knows about the national interest, and it is a disgrace. I started my speech by saying that the Labour party was the greatest political movement of the 20th century, but it is now beginning to look like a rabble.

5.51 pm

Margaret Beckett (Derby South) (Lab): I am really sorry and dismayed to have heard what the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) just said, because I have high regard and respect for him. I simply say to him that he could not be more wrong. He talked with great respect of the work that the Prime Minister has put in; she has made one catastrophic misjudgment after another and it is she who is threatening the national interest. Furthermore, she is in gross dereliction of her most serious duties as the Prime Minister. She is playing an extraordinarily dangerous game. There is every possibility that there is a risk that we will stumble into no deal.

Way back in the beginning, when the referendum result first came into being, I had hoped that there might be a deal that we could vote for that would mitigate the damage. I have been driven to the conclusion that that is not the case mostly because of the catastrophic mess that the Prime Minister has made of the negotiations. As the hon. Member for Broxbourne knows, I have conducted many negotiations myself, so I know whereof I speak. She could not have conducted it worse if she had thought for a week. The dangerous game that she is playing means that, as I said, she is risking our stumbling into a no-deal position.

I really felt for the Minister today. I am happy to say that I have never quite been in the position that he was in at the Dispatch Box, but I have been at the Dispatch Box defending a difficult case, and I felt for him because I am the only answer that he had to any question that anybody asked him was, “All you need to do is vote for the Prime Minister’s deal.” I suggest that he and the hon. Member for Broxbourne put that argument forward with a greater degree of caution than they have so far. My understanding—my perception—is that most people in this House do not think the Prime Minister’s deal delivers on the promises made to those who voted leave. That is one of the reasons why there is so much opposition to it, irrespective of the point of view held by different individuals.

I shall say this briefly, because I am conscious of how many people want to speak. The people who are going to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal—there will be some—are happy because they think that they will be able to go out and say to the British people, “Those of you who voted leave, we delivered on your mandate.” I think they are going to lose, but let us say that I am mistaken and they win, and they get this deal through, or some variety on the theme of this deal. I hear people talk about the Norway option, although it is far from clear to me that the European economic area has any intention of accepting Britain into membership. Let us put that aside for the moment, though, and let us say that either the Prime Minister’s deal or some minor
variant of it carries. What happens then? That is why I say to the hon. Member for Broxbourne that he is absolutely wrong about the national interest. What happens then is that people will see that there are still high levels of immigration; they will see that we are still making payments to the European Union; they will see that we still have a link to the European Court; and they will see that we are still bound by the rules and regulations of the European Union, although we no longer have any voice in deciding what they are. Perhaps most of all, they will see that one of the Prime Minister’s simplest promises—vote for my deal and it will all be over—could not be less true. It will not be over; it will barely have begun. The worst and the most difficult of the negotiations will still be to come, and that will rumble on for years and years.

I will tell the hon. Gentleman why he is wrong about where the national interest lies. Anybody who thinks longer than perhaps a month or so, or six months, beyond the date of decision should think about this very hard: I suspect that the greatest possible disillusion will come if the Prime Minister’s deal, or something like it, goes through, because then people will find out that they are in the circumstances that her deal leaves us in. I cannot think of anything more likely to make people utterly disillusioned with politics and politicians than realising that they have been told, or promised, “Oh, it’s alright, we voted for this. We have left the European Union”, when it does not mean any of the things that they thought it would mean. I entirely agree with the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). I have been driven to the view that what we should do in the national interest—it is the only thing to do in the national interest—is to delay article 50, to put in place procedures for a people’s vote, because it is right for it to go back to the people, and to suggest that we leave it to them but to say that we should stay in the European Union.

The Prime Minister has talked today, as she so often does, of the duty and responsibility of hon. Members when she is in complete dereliction of her own duty. I say that the biggest duty that any of us has is to tell people the truth and it is time that we got on with it.

5.56 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the right hon. Member for Derby South (Margaret Beckett).

We are living in the most serious of times, and I think that that is very clear to all of us. What we are discussing today is of such great import that there should be a reaching out across the Front Benches, as I have said in this place more than once. It is incumbent on the Government to do that and it is also incumbent on the Opposition to do that.

I will largely restrict my remarks to why I believe that no deal should not and must not happen—indeed, I was one of those who signed the letter co-signed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey). A no deal would cause such grave disruption to the businesses in my constituency in the west midlands and further afield.

Let us just look at what no deal means. No deal means going on World Trade Organisation terms. These have been lauded in some quarters. I disagree. I have been involved in international trade for most of my working life. Yes, the WTO provides the lowest common denominator for world trade. It provides for nothing more than that. Those who think that a country such as the United Kingdom will thrive on World Trade Organisation terms, which no other major country thinks are anything like sufficient, are deluded. Indeed, no other country of our size has World Trade Organisation membership without several other additional agreements, whether it is with China, the United States or wherever. They all have agreements with their neighbouring countries for a start.

Let us look at what World Trade Organisation means on a day-to-day basis: it means tariffs. We do not have tariffs with the European Union at the moment, but it will mean tariffs. Much more importantly, it will mean the non-tariff barriers that have already been mentioned, whether that is phytosanitary inspections, veterinary inspections and other types of inspections of borders. I, along with colleagues from the Exiting the European Union Committee, have seen what happens at Dover. It is a smooth flow of trucks through the port—one every few seconds. A slight delay, which we have seen for other reasons, causes massive back-ups. This is simply not possible, and that will happen at other ports as well.

World Trade Organisation terms would also mean that we would have to deal with the separation of the quotas that we have as part of the European Union. This will not be easy. For instance, New Zealand has questions about how its quota of lamb to the European Union will be divided between the UK and the EU27.

We will not have the benefit of the 40 free trade agreements that cover about 70 different countries, unless they are rolled over. It is going to be difficult enough to roll all those over if we sign the withdrawal agreement; if we do not, it will be next to impossible and I do not believe that we have the capacity or time to do that. And that is just for goods.

For services, World Trade Organisation terms would mean a very basic agreement. Whatever has been said about the failure of the European Union to complete the single market in services, it is nevertheless a much better market for services than WTO rules.

Tom Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman, like me, struggle to some extent with those who advocate falling back on World Trade Organisation rules, because they then talk about very comprehensive free trade agreements that in many ways seek to replicate the European Union?

Jeremy Lefroy: The right hon. Gentleman is precisely right. We would be going back several steps only to try to come forward a few steps.

Let me turn to the new trade agreements. Members have already mentioned how difficult it will be to negotiate the new agreement with the European Union. I agree, but I think it will be possible and it will be an excellent agreement. That is why I am going to support the Prime Minister when it comes to the vote in January. However, let us just think about how much more difficult it will be to negotiate that new agreement if we go without a deal. In effect, relations will have broken completely between the United Kingdom and the European Union. There
will be so many other things to have to deal with that the prospect of negotiating a new trade agreement will be at the bottom of the agenda for the European Union and, to be frank, for the UK because we will be dealing with so many other things. The idea that if we come out with no deal, there will somehow be a possibility of negotiating a quick free trade agreement with the European Union to replace the great agreement that we have at the moment is ludicrous. It will not happen. It will be easier for us if we leave with the deal that is on the table.

I will very gently refer to the remarks made by my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), because I do actually agree with him about the approach of the Labour party. I fully respect the position that the official Opposition are taking, but hon. Members should look at the Labour party’s 2017 manifesto and at the withdrawal agreement. With the exception of the Labour party’s manifesto saying that a customs union should be left on the table—if I am quoting it correctly—there is very little difference between this agreement and the manifesto that the Labour party stood on in 2017. That is why I urge both Front Benches to talk. This matter is too important for us to have a line right down the middle. It is incumbent on both sides to talk.

6.3 pm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op):

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who in many ways encapsulates the voice of reason on the Government Benches. I only wish that voice had been more prominent and had prevailed at an earlier stage in the negotiations.

I support my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) in this approach, but we have to recognise that we are now engaged in one of the most dangerous and difficult exercises in parliamentary brinkmanship possible. Looking at the way in which the Prime Minister has conducted these negotiations and the measures that have been announced overnight, it is difficult to come to any other conclusion than that the Prime Minister is trying to drive us towards a situation where Parliament has to make a choice between a bad deal and a disastrous one. If the Prime Minister were genuinely to start to take the necessary measures to avoid a no deal Brexit, it would have been necessary to take them two years ago. As my right hon. and learned Friend has made quite clear, it is actually too late to get the necessary infrastructure and the measures that would be required for a no-deal situation.

What we have now is something that is profoundly damaging—above all, damaging to businesses and to the economy that is sustained by them.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not absolutely necessary that the Government now knock these Brexit fantasies on the head and do not continue to give the hope or the impression to the people of this country that something is possible when it is clearly the most damaging thing that this country could face?

Mr Bailey: Yes. I am going to come to that in a moment.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab):

Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the north-east chamber of commerce that no deal would be disastrous for our economy, that WTO rules would make it much more difficult for our businesses to be able to compete in Europe, and that we in this Chamber should be doing everything possible to stop no deal happening?

Mr Bailey: I completely agree. I presume that Members in all parts of the House have been lobbied by representatives of the manufacturing sector. Living in a manufacturing constituency, I have had an awful lot of lobbying, and I have yet to come across any trade association or any representatives of individual companies who think that the no-deal scenario is anything but a disaster.

Looking at those who seem to want a no-deal scenario, I would divide them into two categories. There are the no-deal deniers—those who still try to perpetuate the myth that this is all the politics of fear and that none of these things will really happen. The fact is that this is not something being generated by politicians to pursue a particular political objective—it is the words of people who have invested in companies; who make the decisions on which the livelihoods of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of our electors depend; and who will have to implement the decisions and deal with the measures that will have to be taken if a no-deal scenario actually occurs. They cannot be disregarded. There is also the myth perpetrated by Government Members that the compromise withdrawal deal that is being promoted by the Prime Minister is somehow a way forward. Certainly, some businesses have said that we should go for it on the basis that it at least buys them a bit of time before the disaster hits them. However, there is nothing in the withdrawal deal that satisfies me that that disaster would not occur.

Today, literally just before I walked into the Chamber, I had an email from a business in my constituency involved in the motor supply industry. It says:

“If we leave the EU with May’s proposed deal we will have access to the European Single Market, but no say in the development of its rules. The automotive sector is bound by enormous amounts of rules governing safety and environmental issues which constantly change. There can be no doubt that our competitor nations will use their very best endeavours to use these rules to their advantage and our disadvantage. All of the main automotive companies in the world have made it plain that they have no interest in investing in a UK that is outside the EU. May’s proposed deal would therefore lead to the decline and eventual disappearance of our industry in the UK.”

I think that is the authentic voice of the small businesses involved at the sharp end of our manufacturing sector.

No deal is also a disaster for our public finances, with £2 billion being spent on preparatory measures. What could we have spent that £2 billion on? There are so many better alternatives—I will not go into them now, but that did not come out in the course of the referendum debate. It also disregards the personal hardship, worry and concern for literally hundreds of thousands of people involved in businesses who have to face Christmas without knowing what the outcome of these negotiations will be and the potential impact on their personal finances.

It all could have been different. People have talked about the Prime Minister’s determination and sense of public duty. I agree that she has it, but that does not alter the fact that we are where we are because of a series of disastrous personal and political positions that she took. Her rhetoric at the Tory party conference was hardly that of a person who wanted to sensibly negotiate
with a body such as the EU. There was also the announcement of the red lines, the opposition to Parliament having a say on the withdrawal agreement—something that was actively fought for and grabbed by this Parliament—and the constant pandering to the no-deal deniers or ideologues on the Government Benches. That is not symptomatic of someone who wanted to reach out and come to an agreement, which I think was possible at one stage.

We only have to look at the vote on triggering article 50 to realise that there was a consensus on both sides of the House at a given time that we had to go forward and respect the will of the people. I have been a remainer and a pro-European all my life, but I voted to trigger article 50 because I respected the view of the people and thought it was necessary to try to implement what they wanted. Equally, as a representative of an important manufacturing constituency, during these negotiations I could not disregard the interests of those companies and the people who work in them, which seem to have been disregarded by the Government’s policies.

This Government’s policy must be to state quite categorically that their overriding political objective is to avoid no deal and that they will take whatever measures necessary, including extending article 50 or talking to Opposition Members to see what sort of deal can be done, to ensure that we do not come out with no deal. I will conclude with a quote from the same manufacturer who contacted me just before I came here today. He says:

“Neither my employees nor I will easily forgive anyone in parliament if this disaster is not stopped before it is too late.”

Only the Government can stop it, and they can only do that by making it quite clear that no deal is not an option.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. Having just come into the Chair and counted how many Members wish to speak, I am somewhat shocked.

Mr Deputy Speaker said that five-minute speeches would be about right because he had an indication that a large number of Members wished to speak. Something must have been said of which I am unaware that has made nine Members decide they have nothing to say after all. I do not know whether the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) will consider that a victory. Members might be a little surprised that the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Bailey) spoke without interruption from me for 10 minutes instead of five. I calculate that if Members speak for approximately six to seven minutes, everyone who wishes to speak will have the opportunity to do so. It is nice to see the House behaving so well and so honourably. I hope that it will continue to do so and that I will not have to introduce an official time limit.

6.14 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): Before I came into the House this afternoon, I, together with other north-east MPs, received a letter from the chief executive of the north-east chamber of commerce. It is entirely apposite to the subject of this debate about the failure of the Prime Minister to bring the deal to the House and about our being able to have a vote on the deal.

The letter is absolutely to the point because it talks about the risk for manufacturing in the north-east of a no-deal Brexit and the impact it will have on businesses. It talks about the need for businesses to have certainty about what is happening so that they can plan their businesses and be clear about what is needed to ensure they go forward positively in the future.

The first thing the letter talks about is the need for preparedness, which again is part of the discussion here today. The concern is that the advice from the Government and the measures being taken, which were announced yesterday, are actually too late for some, while others already have things in hand. There is a real concern about the lack of business preparedness.

It is above time that this House had the chance to have a vote on the Prime Minister’s deal and to express a view clearly. It is something that has already been delayed two weeks, and now we are going away for Christmas, so among all the concern from businesses about what will happen, we have already lost four weeks in which we could have been making a decision. This House could have been expressing a view about how we should move forward and what should be the next steps for this House.

As I say, it is now clear that the Prime Minister cannot achieve the amendments to the legal agreements that she is seeking from Europe which might make the deal acceptable to some. I say “some” because clearly not all people will be satisfied, but it might make the deal acceptable to some who object to it at present.

I want to turn to the letter from James Ramsbotham, the chief executive of the north-east chamber of commerce. Frankly, I was tempted to read out the whole thing as my speech because it is very appropriate. However, you will pleased to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I am just going to read a bit of it. The relevant bit is where he says:

“Firms need clarity, precision and reassurance. The longer businesses wait to understand...the future UK-EU relationship, the bigger the hit to their near-term investment, expansion and confidence. What they want is to know who they will be able to hire in future, how they will pay VAT, whether their goods will be stopped at borders, and whether the contracts they enter into will be enforceable.

One processing manufacturer said, ‘Looking at WTO tariffs of 6.5%, plus fees for shipment, plus additional staffing costs to cope with the increased admin, it quickly adds up and hinders the British market from being competitive in Europe. An Industry which overall sees 75% of its goods exported into Europe could have major issues going forward with a No-Deal Brexit.’”

He also tells us that some businesses are looking to relocate because of concerns about the future.

It is no good the Minister telling us again and again that the best way to avoid no deal is to vote for the Government’s deal, because the Prime Minister’s deal does not actually satisfy those tests. It gives us some temporary relief while other discussions go on in the future under the political declaration. It does not give business the certainty that it is looking for.

Chris Heaton-Harris: It does.

Liz Twist: Well, we are going to have to disagree about this, because clearly businesses do not feel that they have such certainty. It is really important that we get on, have a vote on the deal, have that discussion and then look at where we will go forward.
I want to say to the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) that, like him, I am getting a very heavy email postbag from my constituents with their views. They are not saying to me, “Vote for this deal”.

Mr Charles Walker rose—

Liz Twist: If I may, I will just finish my point.

Some of my constituents are saying, “I voted for Brexit and this deal isn’t it, so vote against it”, and others are saying, “This deal is no good for us; I’m a remainder and I want a better deal, so vote against the deal”. I would say that that is much like the divisions we have seen in this House—on the Government side as well as anywhere else.

I just want to say that it has long been time for us to get on and have the vote on this deal, and move forward to the next stage, with a better proposition and one that we can take forward.

6.19 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): Many hon. Members have focused their remarks on the impact that a no-deal Brexit would have on communities in their respective constituencies. I intend to speak in the same vein, but I shall also argue that it is the Government’s responsibility to rule out such an outcome without delay.

It has been widely reported that up to £5 billion could be wiped from the Welsh economy under a no-deal scenario, which equates roughly to a reduction of some 10% of the Welsh economy. EU rules, regulation and arbitration mechanisms would no longer apply to the UK as a third country, so the current flow of trade with the EU would be constrained, as unhindered access to the single market would cease. Much of the talk about stockpiling and the sufficiency of port infrastructure to support third-country produce checks has focused on Calais and Devon, but of course the potential for disruption is just as acute in Caergybi, or Holyhead—the main port for the UK’s trade with the Republic of Ireland, the UK’s fifth biggest export partner.

The consequences of a no-deal Brexit for Ceredigion, which relies on the knowledge and rural economies, are just as serious. The education sector alone accounts for 20% of our economic output, sustaining some 5,000 jobs, with over 2,800 jobs directly supported by the county’s two universities. The UK’s ability to participate in Horizon 2020, Horizon Europe and Erasmus+—and all such schemes—will be thrown into disarray by a no-deal Brexit, and the uncertainty that will inevitably occur in such a scenario will weigh heavily on our universities’ ability to recruit EU researchers and students. It is little wonder, therefore, that the chief executive of Universities UK has said:

“A no-deal Brexit would have huge implications for universities in all corners of the UK, and prove enormously damaging for regional jobs, growth and skills.”

Furthermore, agriculture is a crucial wealth and job creation industry across rural Ceredigion. It is estimated that every £1 generated in agriculture translates into some £7.40 for the local economy through supply chains and spending, and that each job in farming supports 3.5 jobs in other sectors. It will come as no surprise to Members in the Chamber that red meat—especially lamb—exports are the backbone of the agricultural industry in Wales, and we know that the single market is a vital export destination for Welsh food and drink in general. Over 80% of food and animal exports go to the EU, and between 35% and 40% of all Welsh lamb produced. A no-deal Brexit, and the loss of access to that valuable export market, is simply unthinkable.

The Government are aware of the implications of a no-deal Brexit and the harm that it would cause to the economy. They are now also aware, thanks to the conclusions of the European Court of Justice, that they could avert such a course if ever it seemed likely. I consider it utterly inconceivable for any Government to be so irresponsible as to inflict upon their citizens the level of damage that a no-deal Brexit would cause. That is why I must pose the question again: why are the Government insisting on spending billions of pounds on no-deal preparations, throwing communities across the UK into debilitating uncertainty, when it is within their gift to rule out such an outcome?

The Prime Minister has the power to avoid a no deal by revoking or seeking an extension to article 50, as other hon. Members have rightly outlined this afternoon. I would argue that it is her duty to rule it out now, and dissipate the harmful and unnecessary uncertainty that the mere prospect has generated.

6.23 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Ben Lake).

Theresa May’s disastrous handling of the Brexit negotiations is entirely of her own making. It is she who chose to interpret a narrow victory for leave as meaning that the UK must exit the single market and the customs union; it is she who decided to call a general election in the middle of the most important negotiations in our post-war history; and it is she who utterly failed to face down the hard core of English nationalists in her party who want Brexit at any cost. In among all the chaos and incompetence, however, there is one aspect of her strategy that has become crystal clear. She has been talking up the prospect of no deal in order to bounce MPs from both sides of the House into supporting whatever deal she asks us to approve. Her game plan is simple: scare the living daylights out of Parliament by repeating ad nauseam that the choice will be between her deal and no deal at all.

It is vital that Parliament rejects the Prime Minister’s scaremongering and blackmail tactics, because they are built on an empty threat. The fact is that no deal is simply not going to happen for three reasons. First, a no-deal Brexit would unleash unmitigated chaos across government, business and society. As a member of the Exiting the European Union Committee, I have heard extensive evidence from senior civil servants and business leaders about the extent to which our country is ready to absorb the shock of leaving the EU on 29 March 2019 without a deal.

Wayne David: Does my hon. Friend agree it is not simply that we would be leaving the European Union and relying on WTO trade rules? It would mean a rupture in the whole corpus of legal arrangements that have been in place for 40 years. Such a scenario is totally unthinkable.

Stephen Kinnock: I agree entirely. Let us not forget that this will impact on people’s lives and citizens’ rights—the rights of EU citizens in the UK and British
citizens in the European Union. What will happen to the European arrest warrant? What will happen to our entire security apparatus across the EU? It is not just about trade and the WTO; it is much bigger than that.

I have been deeply impressed by the professionalism and dedication of every one of those who have come in to speak to the Select Committee to give evidence. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that they are engaged in a charade. Let us take the state of preparedness at our ports. Jon Thompson, the head of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, told us that his French counterparts have categorically refused to engage in bilateral discussions about how to plan for a no-deal exit, because bilateral contacts are not permitted under the terms of article 50. We can continue, should we wish to do so, to allow in goods from the EU at Dover without checks on 30 March, but we have absolutely no idea what the French are going to do at Calais in the event of no deal.

On our customs processes, Mr Thompson told us that there are 145,000 businesses across the UK who currently import or export their goods solely within the EU. Thanks to our membership of the customs union, not one of those businesses ever has to complete a customs declaration form because all the checks are done at the point of departure—that is, at the relevant factories, warehouses and farms. If we exit without a deal, every one of those businesses that wishes to continue trading with the EU will need to know how to complete a range of complex customs declarations. According to Mr Thompson, however, to date only 2% of the 145,000 have contacted the HMRC to seek guidance on what they should do in the event of no deal.

On health, Sir Chris Wormald, permanent secretary at the Department of Health and Social Care, told us that there is no clarity on reciprocal healthcare arrangements for UK citizens in the EU and EU citizens in the UK. This will end in the event of no deal. A British tourist in Paris needing medical treatment is currently entitled to full access to the French public healthcare system, but as of 30 March 2019 he or she may be required to hold a private insurance policy.

On legislation, Jill Rutter, director of the Institute for Government, told us that, in order to ensure that UK law is operable on 30 March 2019 in the event of no deal, a mountain of primary and secondary legislation is operable on 30 March 2019 in the event of no deal. This leaves little room for doubt as to the mindset of the French Government contains this sentence: “In case of withdrawal of the UK from the EU without agreement, British nationals and their family members currently residing in France would be staying illegally.”

This leaves little room for doubt as to the mindset of member states’ Governments or the profound challenges that would be created for the British Government and for British citizens and businesses.

Thirdly, but not least, it is absolutely clear that there is no parliamentary majority for no deal. It is equally clear that it is impossible that the Government could consider a no-deal exit without the support of Parliament for such a course of action. The conclusion is, therefore, that a no-deal Brexit is simply not on the cards, and a responsible Government would be making that statement clearly today.

As no deal is not going to happen, and given that the Prime Minister’s deal is dead in the water, it is finally becoming clear. I hope, that there is an option that can bring Parliament together and get us through this difficult time. It is an option I have been talking about for two years now—many of my hon. Friends and colleagues from across the House will be sick to death of me banging this drum, but I will continue to do so. An EFTA-EEA-based Brexit combined with a customs union—otherwise known as the Norway-plus option—is the only option that resolves the Irish border issue and protects the jobs and livelihoods of the people we were elected to represent. It is the only option that I believe can command a cross-party parliamentary majority and which has a hope of reuniting our deeply divided country.

It is vital that Parliament hold its nerve. This is not a choice between the Prime Minister’s deal and no deal, because no deal is simply not going to happen; this is a choice between the Prime Minister’s deal and the right deal; it is a choice between caving in to the Prime Minister’s empty threats and scaremongering and standing up for the interests of our constituents; it is a choice between capitulating to a bully and asserting our sovereignty. I am confident that when the time comes Parliament will step up and do what is right for the country.

Peter Grant: Does the hon. Gentleman fear there is a significant risk that, just as the Government are trying to put unacceptable pressure on Parliament to accept a bad deal by holding up the threat of no deal, so, as these major and often contentious pieces of legislation come through, Parliament will be put under intense pressure to agree bad legislation without proper scrutiny just because we have to get something on the statute book in time?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. This is a steamroller. The tactics and strategy are based on steamlowering, bullying, blackmail and holding a gun to Parliament’s head. The purpose of this debate is to show that Parliament will not have it. We will not be bullied. We will not be presented with a false choice. We will not be blackmailed in the way the Government are attempting. It is a constitutional and democratic outrage.

Secondly, we have no idea how the EU27 would react to a no-deal exit, but draft legislation recently tabled by the French Government contains this sentence: “In case of withdrawal of the UK from the EU without agreement, British nationals and their family members currently residing in France would be staying illegally.”

Mr Charles Walker: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Is it not the case that, when the Speaker or Deputy Speaker stands up, the Member sits down?
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I was trying to prove this evening that this House can behave exceptionally well, and that is why I did not interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I think he has got the hint, given that I am on my feet, that he has exceeded the time I hoped he would take, although as I have not applied a formal time limit, I cannot stop him. The hon. Gentleman, however, being an hon. Gentleman, has now resumed his seat.

6.33 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What we are witnessing is the most expensive hoax in history. Some £2 billion is being wasted preparing for a no-deal situation that would have caused a catastrophic impact on our economy: medicine and food shortages; an economy 10% smaller; £6 billion in tariffs—£2 billion on vehicles alone, £1.6 billion on food, £1.1 billion for metals, and so it goes on. The million diabetics who depend on insulin will be put at risk. We have heard about radioisotopes. This cannot be a serious proposition from a serious Government. The idea that we should face this catastrophe unless we accept a botched deal that nobody wants is completely unreasonable.

Let me turn to this botched deal. People voted, quite reasonably, for more money, more jobs and more trade, and for control of migration and their laws. All that sounds quite reasonable. It would be reasonable to vote for it, and I would not knock anyone for doing so. The problem is that the people who did vote for those things are not getting any of them in this deal. It is therefore reasonable for them to reject it, and reasonable and proper for them to have the right to reject it in a public vote.

Some people say, “Oh well, they voted this way, and if we force them to have another vote, they will be terribly angry.” They will be much more angry when they lose their jobs and their livelihoods. Many people I speak to in Swansea say, “I voted leave, but I did not vote to leave my job.” Some 25,000 people in Swansea Bay rely on EU exports. They are critically worried about tariffs and constraints even within the proposed deal, because we will not be part of the single market.

In my 2017 election manifesto—my personal promises to Swansea—I pledged to do my utmost to ensure that we were in the single market in order to avoid those problems, and give the people the right to have the final say on whether they wanted the deal. My share of the vote went up by 50%, to 60%. It was the highest Labour share in history: higher than the one in 1945 and higher than the one in 1997, without there even being a Labour Government. It was a leave area, but people have changed their minds because they have seen the facts, as any rational person would. The irrationality is on the part of the Government who say, “That is what they thought two years ago before they knew the impacts, so we must force-feed them.” People who ordered a steak and got a bit of chewed-up bacon still have to eat it, which is completely ridiculous.

Under the Prime Minister’s deal—I am not talking about the catastrophic gun that the Government are holding to our heads, and I know that the Prime Minister has tried her best to do what she can—we will end up as a rule-taker rather than a rule-maker. There will not be less migration; it will merely be from further afield, and culturally different. There will not be more trade; there will be less trade, because we will not have the collective leverage of the EU to negotiate with China, with Donald Trump, or with any other large market. When it comes to all the bilateral trade deals, anyone in their right mind, whether from Uruguay or Chile or from South Korea, will say, “Hold on: we are negotiating with a single country rather than a collective. We want a better deal.” We will have worse terms and worse trade, less money and fewer jobs. People do not want that.

Some say, “People will be very angry if we have a people’s vote.” People will be absolutely enraged if they find that they are much poorer, with poorer jobs, because we forced through a botched deal—although obviously it is not the catastrophe that is now said to be the choice. That is why yesterday I presented a Bill proposing that we revoke article 50 if this place cannot agree on a deal that is then ratified by the public. That would enable us to stay where we are, in the status quo, in the EU, and that is what businesses want.

People may talk about parliamentary democracy, but parliamentary democracy involves a duty of care to our citizens. I have been saying, on behalf of Swansea, “We want a vote, and we want to stay in the single market at least, as well as the customs union.” My constituents have endorsed that. They have not said, “Oh no, this is terrible”, because they expect me to think about these things, day in day out, which I do.

No deal would be a disaster. It should be taken off the table. It is irresponsible, and a waste of £2 billion. We should give the people the final say, and then decide what is best. Ultimately, our children and our children’s children will make a judgment on what we have done. If what we have done sets us off on a road to ruin and isolation and to be inward looking, rather than being part of a collective that espouses the values of rights, democracy and the rule of law, shared prosperity and the creation of a better world—if we choose wrongly—they will never forgive us, so let us give the people the final say.

6.35 pm

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): It was interesting to hear the honourable Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy)—who is about to disappear from the Chamber—talk about the perils of the World Trade Organisation. That was fascinating, because we have not really discussed the issue in the Chamber. I have heard, incidentally, that there is a potential not for sanctions, but for vetoes from other countries, such as Russia, in trade agreements under WTO rules. I may be wrong, but that is something that I have heard, and it would be good for it to be confirmed in an intervention.

In the absence of an intervention to confirm that, I shall continue by saying that I have spent the last fortnight on the Fisheries Bill Committee preparing legislation that will see us take back control of our waters and fishing quotas, and hopefully help regenerate coastal towns such as Hartlepool.

Fishermen and fisherwomen were among the most vociferous pro-Brexit voters. They saw it as an opportunity to tip the balance back in our favour and limit access to our seas by non-UK trawlers. That is the point: it is all about rebalancing—escaping the shackles of the common fisheries policy, but not destroying our trade links with the EU. A hard Brexit threatens that for our fishing industry, and will potentially lead to untold damage to businesses up and down the UK.
We should have had a meaningful vote last week so that we could get on with the job of thrashing out an alternative—an alternative that would protect jobs, businesses, the environment and the flow of goods across our borders after we leave the EU. We have a mere 100 days before we leave the EU; the clock is ticking fast, yet the Government are dithering and wasting precious time. As has been said, kicking the can down the road resolves nothing. Setting aside £2 billion to prepare for a no-deal is a tremendous waste of money—money that could help prevent my council from raiding its reserves to make ends meet; money that could be put back into public health budgets in my constituency which have been severely cut and redirected to the leafy suburbs of the south; money that could be put back into education and save our struggling schools in Hartlepool; and money that could be better used to end the blight of poverty and homelessness. In Hartlepool, the Trussell Trust food bank has handed out more than 27,000 meals in the last 11 months.

Brexit is a brave step into the unknown, but my constituents voted to take that step in the referendum. They did so in the expectation that things would be better and the prospects more prosperous for our country. They did not expect to be worse off, to be cut off and to lose jobs and businesses. That is why we need urgently to get beyond the meaningful vote. Let Parliament take control and get us out of this mess.

6.42 pm

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on securing this important debate.

We find ourselves in an historic situation as a country and as a democracy. Our country faces the real possibility of leaving the European Union in March 2019 without a deal having been reached in the negotiations. The consequences of such a scenario for trade, jobs, living standards, workers’ rights and the integrity of our country would be both profound and devastating, and we have a Government who are riding roughshod over our democracy by the way they are treating this Parliament. This Government were the first to be found in contempt of Parliament in modern times, and they continue to refuse to put their Brexit deal to a vote of this House. Taxpayers’ money is being wasted by this House and this Prime Minister by her touring Europe.

The Prime Minister insists that her deal is the best on the table for Britain, yet she continues to refuse to bring it to this House for a vote. That does not suggest to me that the Prime Minister has strong confidence in the contents of the deal. If she really believed that this is the best deal, she would be prepared to make the case for it in a meaningful debate and vote in this House.

I can remember the times when the Prime Minister repeatedly told the country that no deal was better than a bad deal. Now she tells the country that a bad deal is better than no deal—and this is indeed a bad deal. It fails to protect jobs and living standards. It offers no guarantees that workers’ rights, environmental standards and consumer protections will not be put at risk. It threatens the integrity of the United Kingdom, due to the backstop that is meant to prevent a hard border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The nature of that backstop, and the inability of the UK to leave it unilaterally, would turn our country into Hotel California. We could check out any time we liked, but we could never leave.

The Prime Minister has brought about some rare unity in the House. She has united Members from across the party divide against her deal. When it finally comes to the House for a vote, I am confident that it will be rejected. What worries me is that the Government continue to rule out the prospect of a no-deal Brexit that the Government’s own analysis has shown would be devastating for the economy. They should provide certainty for businesses, workers and communities by taking the option of no deal firmly off the table.

My constituents want an end to the political games that are being played in this House. They do not want the Prime Minister’s botched deal, which fails to protect jobs, living standards and workers’ rights. They do not want the European Research Group’s hard Brexit, which would devastate our economy, and they do not want the political opportunism of the Scottish National party, which seeks to use Brexit as its latest grievance to push for a second independence referendum. They want a Government who can negotiate a Brexit deal that unites the country and delivers a fairer Britain.

Alex Chalk: The hon. Gentleman’s Front-Bench spokesman has said that it is highly unlikely that the Government will get meaningful changes to their deal. Does the hon. Gentleman seriously think that the European Union, which has quite a lot of other things to think about, is going to contemplate any sort of radical, root-and-branch completely different deal that his party might come up with before the end of March?

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question, because I was just about to go on to talk about a Labour Government.

A Labour Government will negotiate a strong single market deal and permanent customs union with the EU to protect our trade, jobs and living standards. A Labour Government will guarantee workers’ rights, environmental protections and consumer standards. A Labour Government will guarantee the rights of EU nationals living in this country, who contribute so much to our public services and society. We will address the underlying causes of Brexit by investing in our communities, tackling low pay, ending precarious employment and ensuring that our public services are run for people, not for profit.

I will finish up now, as it would be unfair to the next speaker to carry on. I reiterate the call that I put to the Prime Minister in the House last week: recognise that you have failed to deliver a Brexit deal that delivers for working people; recognise that you no longer command the confidence of the country; and give the people the opportunity to elect a Labour Government by calling a general election, so that we can get to work for the many people looking on at this Tory pantomime and this shambles of a Government.

6.47 pm

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), and I thank him for his courtesy.

[Mike Hill]
This is not a Noel Edmonds game show. The Government are playing politics with Brexit. They are playing on people’s fears, and they have created a hoax that will cost our children and our children’s children the taxpaying for decades to come. The Chancellor has said that at least £4.2 billion has been set aside for no-deal planning since 2016. That is a grotesque waste of taxpayers’ money on something that will not happen, that does not need to happen and that Parliament must not allow to happen. How much extra help would that £4.2 billion buy for the NHS? How many extra police and how much extra help for our schools would it buy? And that £4.2 billion is only the Government spend. The increased costs now for our businesses do not bear thinking about.

Why am I so confident that a no-deal Brexit does not need to happen? When the Government were negotiating with the EU27, they took a negotiating position about no deal, using the slogan “no deal is better than a bad deal”. That was the negotiating position taken by the Government to try to negotiate the best possible deal with the EU, but the negotiations concluded. The Prime Minister and the EU signed off on an agreement. This is the final deal, according to the Prime Minister. She said as much when she opened the debate that was concluded prematurely.

Given that an agreement has been signed off, pending the approval of the UK Parliament and the European Parliament, why is no deal still being touted as an option? It is there for one reason only: the Prime Minister wants to bully Members across the House into voting for her deal. It is a deal that businesses tell me will lead the UK into a blind Brexit, when nothing about our future has been nailed down. It is a deal that does not give us access to the European Medicines Agency, which gives patients access to cancer drugs six months earlier. The Minister shakes his head, but the deal says that there is an aspiration to join the European Medicines Agency; it does not nail anything down. It is a deal that leaves us following EU rules without having any say in them. It is a national humiliation. We will not be bullied, and we do not want to vote for the Prime Minister’s deal.

The Prime Minister could easily rule out no deal herself. If the House was allowed to vote on the matter, no deal could easily be ruled out. There was even an amendment to the motion that was pulled that would have ruled out a no-deal Brexit. The Government are wasting so much money on something reckless that could be stopped now. And now Parliament is going into recess—18 days off at time of national crisis, when we could be sorting this out.

Why are the Government not allowing Parliament to vote on this now? It is simply because they are trying to escalate the crisis. What responsible Government allow a crisis to develop just to bully MPs? What responsible Government spend millions on fridges for political reasons? What responsible Government, for political reasons, allow businesses to escalate their planning for no deal, which is likely to include making people redundant? Whether people voted to leave or to remain back in 2016, nobody voted for this. A no-deal Brexit was not on the ballot paper and it was not in the prospectus.

I believe that there is only one sensible way out of this crisis: Parliament must be allowed immediately to rule out a no-deal Brexit, without going into recess. Parliament must be allowed, the day after new year’s day—when everyone else goes back to work—to vote on the deal. When Parliament votes against the Prime Minister’s bad deal, as it will, we must revoke the article 50 notice and give the people the final say. This would be the first chance the public have had to vote on EU exit while being in possession of all the facts needed to make the decision. We need a people’s vote with an option to stay in the EU.

I represent Stockton South in the north-east of England, an area with significant inequalities, in need of investment and massively dependent on our relationship with the EU: 57% of the north-east’s trade is with the EU. Our area stands to lose the most from a no-deal Brexit—16% less growth, according to the reports that the Government did not want us to see. North-east businesses are pleading with MPs to rule out a no-deal Brexit. The North East England chamber of commerce, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) said, wants us to stay in the single market and in the customs union to protect jobs. A no-deal Brexit is an existential threat to the NHS. The Government should stop playing politics with Brexit, immediately rule out no deal and give us a meaningful vote without delay.

6.54 pm

Keir Starmer: This largely been a good debate, with clear and powerful points being made on both sides of the House on which we all need to reflect.

Despite the Minister’s valiant attempts, he was not convincing in his defence of the preparations for no deal. No deal is not viable and not credible, and if that is true, it will not serve the Government’s intended purpose in bringing this to a binary choice, and we should not be wasting money on it. No deal should be taken off the table, and then we could have a sensible discussion about what happens next.

A lot was said by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) about the national interest. I will not sink to misrepresenting his views, even though he sank to misrepresenting mine.

Mr Charles Walker: I am really fascinated to know what deal the right hon. and learned Gentleman would accept from the Prime Minister.

Keir Starmer: I have said for months on end that—

Mr Walker: What deal?

Keir Starmer: If the hon. Gentleman listened, he might actually understand what I have been saying for month after month and not sink to misrepresenting my view. I have argued for a permanent customs union and a single market deal. I have bothered to go to Brussels over two years to discuss whether that is viable, and I would not have proposed it if I did not think it viable. That is something I have done over and above what he has done.

Mr Walker: That is not Great Britain but little Britain.

Keir Starmer: I really think the hon. Gentleman should not embarrass himself any further.

What is not in the national interest are the red lines that the Prime Minister agreed not with her Cabinet, and not even with this House, but with a group of three or four people in the autumn of 2016. We have all had to live with those red lines ever since, and we have had no say. That was not in the national interest.
It was not in the national interest to push Parliament away at the beginning of the process, perhaps recognising that, in the end, we would have to reach consensus. It was not sensible to push Parliament away after the snap general election of 2017, when it was obvious that what is happening now would happen. It was not in the national interest never to reach across to the Opposition. It was not in the national interest to take as long as until June 2018 to come up with the Chequers proposal.

Every time I had debates and discussions with people in the EU27 before June, they said, “What is your Government trying to achieve. We don't even know that.” That was not in the national interest, and it was not in the national interest to propose a Chequers deal that, hopelessly, was not accepted even by Conservative Members and that was immediately rejected by the EU. That is the central concern.

The reason why we are talking about the backstop and an additional transition is that the future relationship is so hopelessly underdeveloped. Nobody here and nobody in Europe thinks for a moment that the future relationship will be ready for January 2021. It is another of those myths that we have had for two years. It is not going to happen, which is why there is great anxiety about the backstop.

A backstop in which England, Wales and Scotland are out of the single market will have repercussions, and having a future relationship that is so blind that we do not know whether it might be economically close or distant is not something that any responsible Opposition could vote for.

It was not in the national interest to resist a meaningful vote. We are now all enjoying the fact that we will have a meaningful vote in January, but we would not have had it if Opposition Members, and some Conservative Members, had not voted for it. I do not know whether the hon. Member for Broxbourne did. I think he probably voted against it, voting not to have a say, not to have this debate and not to have the chance to have a say—just wave it through.

**Mr Charles Walker:** It is because of my Committee that Parliament has the meaningful vote.

**Keir Starmer:** I asked whether the hon. Gentleman voted for it.

**Mr Walker:** You are being ridiculous.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** Order. I am determined to prove this evening that the House can be well behaved.

**Keir Starmer:** It was not in the national interest to resist the meaningful vote. It was not in the national interest to resist any disclosure of impact assessments, which had to be forced. It was not in the national interest not to disclose legal advice that was relevant but not, in truth, confidential. And it was not in the national interest to pull the vote and prevent what needs to happen next.

I have been consistent in arguing for my proposition. We have tabled amendments before the House time and again, and they have been voted down time and again through blind loyalty. Instead of a Prime Minister and a Government who are prepared to work across the House for true consensus, what is happening now among Government Members was utterly predictable at 10 o'clock, when the result of that snap election came in. At that moment, the Prime Minister should have realised and thought about the long-term prospect of getting a deal through, and that meant working in a consensual way, taking on board the proper points that have been made by Opposition Members. That is what acting in the national interest is all about.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of the Cabinet's decision to accelerate preparations for a no-deal outcome to Brexit, following the Prime Minister's failure to allow this House promptly to express its view on the Government's deal, in the light of the significant public expenditure involved.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Last night, a man sleeping rough on Parliament's doorstep died. This is the second time that that has happened. I know individual MPs and staff do what they can to help people, but I wonder whether you are aware of any strategy that Parliament might be seeking to put in place to support people who are homeless. I also wonder whether there has been any indication from Ministers that they will be making a statement on this tragedy and on their failure to address the crisis of homelessness that we see every day in our communities up and down the country.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing):** I thank the hon. Lady for her point of order and for bringing to the attention of the House the tragedy of the loss of life of someone who has been homeless and sleeping rough here. I am sure the whole House will join me in saying how sorry we are that something like that has happened. She has asked me whether I am aware of whether Ministers are likely to come forward with plans to deal with homelessness. I understand that the Secretary of State might well be coming forward with such plans, but I have no formal indication of when that might be or in what form. The hon. Lady has made some very important points, and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench have heard them and that the Ministers with responsibility will come to know very quickly about what she has drawn to the attention of the House—if by no other means, I will make sure that they know about it. I have every confidence that Ministers will take into consideration what she has said this evening in making future plans.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Before I call the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) to move the motion, it might be helpful for the House if I explain that as the debate under Standing Order No. 24 began at precisely 4.24 pm, the Backbench business may continue until 9.36 pm. I understand that the second debate on the Order Paper under Backbench Business—I am helpfully getting assent from the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee on this, for which I thank him—will not be moved today.

7.3 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House calls on the Government to commission an independent assessment of the cumulative impact of changes to the social security system on sick and disabled people and their families and carers.

It has been a long day for everybody, but I appreciate the fact that we are able to hold this debate, as it is so important to the millions of disabled people, many of whom will be watching today. We applied to the Backbench Business Committee for this debate back in June, and I am grateful to the Committee’s members for supporting this debate, but in six months a lot has marched on.

Let me refresh everybody’s memories. Back in 2013, nearly 105,000 people signed a petition launched by the War On Welfare campaign—WOW, for short—that called on the Government to carry out a cumulative impact assessment of the effect of Government cuts on disabled people. Back in February 2014, we held that debate, and Members from all parties raised the alarm about the cumulative effects of austerity on disabled people. Disappointingly, the Government’s response at the time was to deny that the public spending cuts—not only in social security but across other Government Departments—were having such a detrimental impact on disabled people. They also said that cumulative impact assessment methodology was very difficult. At that time, Scope and Demos estimated that the cumulative effects of the changes in the Welfare Reform Act 2012 alone amounted to £28 billion-worth of cuts for 3.7 million people.

It is abundantly clear from the numerous inquiries, reports and analyses, as well as from the personal testimonies of disabled people themselves, that austerity is doing immense harm to disabled people and their families and carers. I shall expand on that in a moment, but I wish to clarify exactly what a cumulative impact assessment—or a CIA—is; it is a mouthful to keep saying that every time. A CIA involves various methods and processes to assess the overall effect of a set of changes—for example, Government policies such as tax or welfare reforms—on a particular population, which in this case is disabled people. The assessment can only quantify the impacts—for example, by looking at the net changes in income—but use qualitative methods to understand how the policy changes affect disabled people or other groups. As whole, impact assessments are decision-making tools. They should inform policy development based on the evidence and findings that the assessments present. They can also be used retrospectively. The power of CIAs is that they consider a number of policies together to see how they affect each other.

I believe passionately in evidence-based policy. Too often, it is the other way around: policy-based evidence—we select the evidence that suits the policies that we want. CIAs can help to avoid that. For me, they are an essential component of open and transparent policy making. If a politician says, for example, that they want to tackle burning injustices in society, CIAs will say whether or not a policy programme can achieve that. They are therefore also a way to hold politicians to account.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): We should bear it in mind that the Government, at least at the two most recent general elections, wanted to save about £12 billion from the welfare budget, so all these systems are geared towards that end. That is why we have major problems with universal credit. For people with disabilities, there are issues with the independent living allowance, which really unsettled a lot of families, say the least. More importantly, every so often a person with disabilities is subject to a review, which causes great anxiety, and in some instances leads to mental stress and strain. It is not a very fair system, and the private sector should not be involved because at the end of the day it is very much about saving money.

Debbie Abrahams: Yes, and I shall come to exactly some of the points my hon. Friend raised. He managed to get quite a bit into that intervention.

What CIAs have been done so far? Back in March this year, the Equality and Human Rights Commission published its report on the cumulative impact of tax and welfare reforms. The report looked at the effect, since 2010, of tax, welfare, social security and public spending on people with protected characteristics as set out in the Equality Act 2010. It included assessments of the impact on disabled people. The EHRC looked at the measures introduced in both the 2012 Act and the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, including the move to personal independence payments from disability living allowance; the cuts in support to the employment and support allowance work-related activity group; the introduction of universal credit, which involved the removal of the severe and enhanced disability premiums; the freeze in the uprating of social security support payments; and more. The EHRC analysis found that, by 2021, households with at least one disabled adult and a disabled child will lose more than £6,500 a year—that is 13% of their income. Households with six or more disabilities lose almost £3,150 a year, and disabled lone parents, predominantly women, with at least one disabled child lose almost £10,000 of their net income.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My hon. Friend is outlining analysis of the loss of income experienced by disabled people, but I know that she will also want to acknowledge the work of the Social Metrics Commission led by Baroness Stroud from the other place, which has also identified the additional costs that are experienced by disabled people and which has properly, or more accurately therefore, portrayed the poverty that they experience compared with some of the measures
that we have been able to use previously. Does she agree that a cumulative assessment is about drawing together many different ways of measuring the impact of cuts, changes and access to public services and the additional costs that disabled people and their families experience?

Debbie Abrahams: My hon. Friend makes an absolutely essential point. I will come on to the poverty that disabled people are experiencing by virtue of the additional costs that they face. She is right that a whole range of different methods can be used and we need to look at all of them to ensure that we can fully understand the impacts on disabled people.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): My hon. Friend is setting out an excellent case for what cumulative impact assessments can achieve. Does she agree with me on the holistic impact of other cuts, particularly on our health services? I am seeing GPs in my constituency who are refusing to write fit notes or assessments for medical evidence for people. We are seeing cuts in voluntary services, community transport and befriending services, leaving people with disabilities feeling utterly isolated, alone and bereft.

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. Again, my hon. Friend makes an essential point. The UN Committee investigating breaches in the UN convention on the rights of disabled people found those issues as well.

That was the EHRC's cumulative impact assessment back in March. Although October’s Budget made some changes to universal credit, it restored, as analysis of the Office for Budget Responsibility showed, just half of what was cut in 2015, and only marginally helped those disabled people who are able to work. For those too ill to work, analyses by Policy in Practice shows that they will be financially worse off compared with when they were on legacy benefits. Importantly, today’s Work and Pensions Committee report confirmed the issues that many of us have already raised about the proposed managed migration of disabled people onto universal credit and said that it needs to be stopped. Furthermore, we need to ensure that the so-called natural migration that results when there is a change of circumstances needs to be properly looked at.

Apart from the changes in universal credit, there were absolutely no other measures for disabled people in the Budget. In fact, the OBR report showed that disabled people were set to lose more social security support by 2022. For example, personal independence payment spending is to be £1 billion less in 2022 compared with March this year.

I am sure that the Government will say that they are helping disabled people to improve their living standards by getting them into work. However, just over 51% of 4 million disabled people of working age are in employment compared with 81% of non-disabled people—a disability employment gap of just over 30%, a figure that has barely narrowed since 2015 when the Conservative party manifesto pledged to halve that gap. As we also know, there are more than 8 million households with at least one person in work that are living in poverty. Work is not, as is frequently said by Government Members, a route out of poverty.

Last year, the Government set more modest ambitions with a new target to get 1 million more disabled people into work, but even this needs a radical rethink. There are many reasons why the disability employment gap has hardly been reduced in the last three years, including the lack of information and advice for employers, but we must remember that discrimination against disabled workers is still quite prevalent. In a recent survey, 15% of disabled people revealed that they had been discriminated against when applying for a job, and one in five while they were in work. Information is not enough to address this; it needs leadership and cultural change.

Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that a cumulative impact assessment would also identify the lack of access to legal aid when people may need to take forward discrimination cases in employment?

Debbie Abrahams: Absolutely. I was going to mention employment tribunals, which I think have fallen by 80% since the cuts to legal aid. A cumulative impact assessment would enable us to see the impacts there.

With the best will in the world, the Disability Confident scheme just does not cut it. There needs to be a commitment to expand and properly resource access to work. Supporting under 34,000 disabled people a year at and into work is a drop in the ocean when there are over 2 million unemployed disabled people who want to work. But as we know, not all disabled people are able to work. The consequence of the inadequate support made available through our social security system is that 4.3 million sick and disabled people are living in poverty. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) mentioned, disabled people are twice as likely to live in persistent poverty as non-disabled people; 80% of disability-related poverty is because of the additional costs that disabled people face by virtue of their disability, and these have been estimated at £570 a month on average.

The cuts to social security mean that more and more disabled people are becoming isolated in their own home as their mobility vehicles or personal support are taken from them. Many are struggling to pay their rent or mortgage. Their health conditions have deteriorated and other conditions have developed, including mental health conditions, as they face the relentless stress and anxiety resulting from a social security system that is hostile, unsupportive and even dehumanising.

The sanctions regime that has affected over 1 million disabled people since 2010, the work capability assessment and personal independence payment assessment processes are all part of this. Quite frankly, it is grotesque that people with progressive conditions such as motor neurone disease have, until last month, been habitually forced through the personal independence payment assessment process. I understand that there are still issues with that, although it was meant to have stopped last month. I would be interested in the Minister’s response to that point.

There is also overwhelming evidence of the inaccuracies—some have called them lies—in those assessment reports. Why have the Government not been able to act on this? With over 70% of assessment appeals successful, whatever contract management processes the Government have in place, are clearly not fit for
purpose. All these Government social security changes will have a huge toll on the health, wellbeing and even the longevity of disabled people.

A peer-reviewed study by my former colleague Ben Barr and his colleagues showed the detrimental mental health effects of the work capability assessment, including it being independently associated with an increase in suicides. On top of this, the Government’s own data reveal that the death rates for people on incapacity benefit and employment support allowance are 4.3 times higher than in the general population, people in the ESA support group are 6.3 times more likely to die than the general population, and those in the work-related activity group are twice as likely to die as the general population. I reported these figures back in 2015. People on IB and ESA are poorly; they are not feckless as too many people have tried to suggest. But again, the Government did not listen and went on to push disabled people in the support group and originally assessed as not fit for work through another work capability assessment process into the WRAG, and then cut their support by £1,500 a year in 2016.

**Ruth George:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** If my hon. Friend does not mind, I am conscious that I need to make progress.

Last month’s *British Medical Journal* report from King’s College and other research centres showed the impact of social care cuts on additional deaths of disabled adults and older people. They estimate that for every £10 per head cut in social care, there are five additional deaths. They also estimate 150,000 additional deaths by 2020, on 2014 trends. I will just let that sink in—150,000 additional deaths.

National and international organisations have called on the Government to undertake a cumulative impact assessment of the effect of cuts on disabled people. They include the Government’s own Social Security Advisory Committee, the House of Lords Select Committee on the 2010 Equality Act and Disability, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and, last month, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

However, I would just like to refresh everyone’s memory on last year’s findings from the UN committee investigating breaches since 2010 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. These are breaches by this Government. It said that the Government were responsible for “grave” and “systemic violations” of the rights of disabled people, and that these failures amounted to a “human catastrophe”. Although it highlighted the poverty and shocking impact of cuts on disabled people’s ability to live adequately and independently, it went beyond social protection and social care issues, listing 60 recommendations right across all the articles of the convention and all Government Departments, from accessible physical environments, to education and access to justice. A key recommendation was that the UNCRPD should be enshrined in UK law.

The UN committee also expressed concerns regarding how the terms under which the UK leaves the European Union could affect disabled people. I noted with alarm a leaked DWP report in *The Times* last week that also suggests this. Since the 1990s, the UK has trailed behind Europe on the rights of disabled people. The Government’s refusal earlier this year to protect the rights of disabled people by incorporating the EU charter of fundamental rights into UK law as we leave the EU is deeply disappointing.

My other concern is how disabled people, who have been very poorly served by this Government, will do with an even weaker economy. In all the exit scenarios from credible analysts, the economy shrinks both in the short and the long term compared with the situation in our current relationship with the EU. Disabled people have been at the back of the queue in public spending terms since 2010. What will happen to them with an even smaller spending pot? Although a Labour Government would make different political choices to tackle poverty and inequality, with lower levels of economic growth, how quickly we can do this will be a real issue if we are to stick to the fiscal rules we set out in last year’s general election.

In recent days, in preparation for this debate, I have been contacted by hundreds of sick and disabled people with their stories of how these cuts have affected them. I would like to share a few of those stories. L, who is a single mum in Oldham, contacted my office recently after her UC was suddenly stopped. She was told that it was because her son, who has severe learning disabilities and who L is the carer for, had reached his 19th birthday. This “change in circumstances” meant that her son had to make his own claim. Unfortunately, no one had told L this. Instead, they just stopped her support payments. She was lucky in that her family helped her out for the five weeks until she had her payment reinstated, but she told me:

“At times I just want to end it all...it’s just so hard and I get no support or respite.”

Another of my constituents, John, was refusing to have the life-saving surgery he needs for a brain tumour because he was worried he would be sanctioned. He had been sanctioned for three months earlier in the year because he did not attend a work capability assessment, although he had explained it was because of his treatment. He had been contacted by hundreds of sick and disabled people by incorporating the EU charter of fundamental rights into UK law as we leave the EU is deeply disappointing.

**Debbie Abrahams:** If my hon. Friend does not mind, I am conscious that I need to make progress.

My concern is how disabled people, who have been very poorly served by this Government, will do with an even weaker economy. In all the exit scenarios from credible analysts, the economy shrinks both in the short and the long term compared with the situation in our current relationship with the EU. Disabled people have been at the back of the queue in public spending terms since 2010. What will happen to them with an even smaller spending pot? Although a Labour Government would make different political choices to tackle poverty and inequality, with lower levels of economic growth, how quickly we can do this will be a real issue if we are to stick to the fiscal rules we set out in last year’s general election.

In recent days, in preparation for this debate, I have been contacted by hundreds of sick and disabled people with their stories of how these cuts have affected them. I would like to share a few of those stories. L, who is a single mum in Oldham, contacted my office recently after her UC was suddenly stopped. She was told that it was because her son, who has severe learning disabilities and who L is the carer for, had reached his 19th birthday. This “change in circumstances” meant that her son had to make his own claim. Unfortunately, no one had told L this. Instead, they just stopped her support payments. She was lucky in that her family helped her out for the five weeks until she had her payment reinstated, but she told me:

“At times I just want to end it all...it’s just so hard and I get no support or respite.”

Another of my constituents, John, was refusing to have the life-saving surgery he needs for a brain tumour because he was worried he would be sanctioned. He had been sanctioned for three months earlier in the year because he did not attend a work capability assessment, although he had explained it was because of his treatment. He had been contacted by hundreds of sick and disabled people by incorporating the EU charter of fundamental rights into UK law as we leave the EU is deeply disappointing.

**Ruth George:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** If my hon. Friend does not mind, I am conscious that I need to make progress.

Last month’s *British Medical Journal* report from King’s College and other research centres showed the impact of social care cuts on additional deaths of disabled adults and older people. They estimate that for every £10 per head cut in social care, there are five additional deaths. They also estimate 150,000 additional deaths by 2020, on 2014 trends. I will just let that sink in—150,000 additional deaths.

National and international organisations have called on the Government to undertake a cumulative impact assessment of the effect of cuts on disabled people. They include the Government’s own Social Security Advisory Committee, the House of Lords Select Committee on the 2010 Equality Act and Disability, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and, last month, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights.

However, I would just like to refresh everyone’s memory on last year’s findings from the UN committee investigating breaches since 2010 of the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. These are breaches by this Government. It said that the Government were responsible for “grave” and “systemic violations” of the rights of disabled people, and that these failures amounted to a “human catastrophe”. Although it highlighted the poverty and shocking impact of cuts on disabled people’s ability to live adequately and independently, it went beyond social protection and social care issues, listing 60 recommendations right across all the articles of the convention and all Government Departments, from accessible physical environments, to education and access to justice. A key recommendation was that the UNCRPD should be enshrined in UK law.

The UN committee also expressed concerns regarding how the terms under which the UK leaves the European Union could affect disabled people. I noted with alarm a leaked DWP report in *The Times* last week that also suggests this. Since the 1990s, the UK has trailed behind Europe on the rights of disabled people. The Government’s refusal earlier this year to protect the rights of disabled people by incorporating the EU charter of fundamental rights into UK law as we leave the EU is deeply disappointing.

My other concern is how disabled people, who have been very poorly served by this Government, will do with an even weaker economy. In all the exit scenarios from credible analysts, the economy shrinks both in the short and the long term compared with the situation in our current relationship with the EU. Disabled people have been at the back of the queue in public spending terms since 2010. What will happen to them with an even smaller spending pot? Although a Labour Government would make different political choices to tackle poverty and inequality, with lower levels of economic growth, how quickly we can do this will be a real issue if we are to stick to the fiscal rules we set out in last year’s general election.
contract an illness. Like the NHS, our social security system should be there for all of us in our time of need. People should not be vilified by a system that is meant to be there to support them.

In addition to understanding the cumulative impact of Government policy, which the motion calls for, we need to radically transform our social security system and develop a new social contract with the British people. I know that my hon. Friends on the shadow side of the House will have seen social security spending cuts of nearly £40 billion, which I was proud to write, were a start, we need to do much more—I know that that is recognised—particularly regarding the financial inadequacy in the social security system. We cannot expect people who are living in such hardship and poverty to wait a few years for a real living wage to kick in. What about the disabled people who cannot work?

The 1942 Beveridge report was the basis for a new welfare state, set up after the second world war, when the debt to GDP ratio was over 250%. Under Beveridge, we established the NHS in 1948 and expanded social security and our education system. It was heralded as a revolutionary system that would provide income security for its citizens as part of a comprehensive policy of social progress. But since then, society has changed. The pressures from globalisation, automation and an ageing society mean that we need to develop a new, sustainable social security system that we can be proud of.

We need a new Beveridge report for the 21st century, defining a new social contract with the British people; addressing the poverty, inequalities and indignity that millions of people—disabled and non-disabled, young and old, men and women—are enduring; and bringing hope to a new generation as it did 76 years ago. The poverty and inequalities that disabled people are facing are unacceptable, but they are not inevitable.

7.27 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). I commend her on her passionate speech.

In recent months, much has been said of the ongoing changes to the social security system. Indeed, some Opposition Members continually focus on negative experiences, to the exclusion of the positive aspects of change. I cannot agree with that often gloomy assessment, however well intended it is. I have spoken to those in my constituency who deal with the delivery of a changing welfare system at the jobcentre every working day, and who also dealt with the previous clumsy, fragmented social security system. I was pleased to note that staff are enthusiastic about the changes and advised me that the Government have listened to them on this long journey and continue to listen when areas of improvement are identified.

With the wholesale replacement of an entire welfare system that was tired and not fit for purpose, such gradual improvements are not surprising—indeed, they are an indication that the Government continue to listen to feedback from those best placed to offer it. The work coaches dealing with cases each and every day now have greater flexibility to help vulnerable individuals, assisting each in a different way, tailored to their particular circumstances. Coaches can focus on the most pertinent cases, while claimants who demonstrate their familiarity with the system through their daily work diary can be left, for the most part, to navigate the system by themselves, although assistance must always be available to them if required.

Ruth George: The hon. Gentleman is making some points about the universal credit system, but that system is not accessible by 50% of disabled people. They are unable to access it online or through their work journal. In my area, home visits are not being allowed either. What does the hon. Gentleman say to those people who cannot access such a system?

Bill Grant: It is difficult to say something positive about those cases, but I can relate that to my own experience—

Ruth George: These are people with disabilities.

Bill Grant: I can only relate that to my own experience. We have outreach workers who go and assist these individuals, and that assistance must be given when requested. I am saddened if that is the case in the hon. Lady’s area, but I am proud of the staff in Ayr and other local jobcentres.

Like many Members, I have had concerns that the implementation of such a comprehensive system may lead to errors, human or indeed systemic, in the support given in particular to vulnerable and disabled claimants. Indeed, I have referred to these concerns previously in this very Chamber. However, I have been reassured by recent measures, particularly those announced in the Budget, to ensure support during that transition. The additional £1 billion over five years to support the transition is especially welcome, but I accept that more would be welcome in that regard.

I have likewise been concerned by allegations of failings in the health assessments required under the personal independence payment scheme. However, on inspection of and after a closer look at the figures, this pessimism is not supported. I understand that only 4%—Interruption. There is a degree of pessimism. Of initial decisions, only 4% are overturned at appeal. Of course, we have all dealt with specific cases where errors have indeed been made—and, I hope, rectified—but the overall figures are encouraging. I repeat that the overall figures are encouraging. We need to monitor what we are doing to understand what we are doing. Almost 90% are satisfied with the PIP claim process.

Something that is often overlooked, sadly in my view, is the flexibility for those with disabilities returning to work that is encouraged by the revised welfare system. Where previously there were rigid rules—very rigid rules—there is now the flexibility to allow a phased reduction in benefits while a person builds up their hours and their confidence in a new role. This can be a challenging yet rewarding event for the individual. This is a sensible element of the new system in helping people back into work, where appropriate, and one I very much support.
The Disability Confident scheme, which has been with us for a number of years, also assists greatly with this process. I commend employers throughout the length and breadth of the country for embracing this excellent system. At this juncture, I note that disability benefits are not covered by the benefits cap, and rightly so.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): On the Disability Confident scheme, will the hon. Gentleman recommend that MPs should be joining it and trying to ensure that they engage with employment practices that support people with disabilities to come and work in the House of Commons? The Speaker’s internship scheme, which has been extended to include placements for people with disabilities, is an excellent scheme. Will he also suggest that we should be looking at people with disabilities not just as employees, but as employers, and doing all we can to support their progress?

Bill Grant: I wholly agree with the hon. Lady. Yes, we should be trailblazers and setting the example by giving employment to those who are seeking employment and want to contribute to society, and broadening that as best we can. We should also be encouraging local employers, as I am sure the hon. Lady does, to take that on board, and to build a bridge between the person who really is employable and wants to work and the opportunity for the employer that, perhaps with a minor adjustment to the workplace, can accommodate a disabled person. I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention.

I am sure hon. Members will be encouraged to note that in the United Kingdom—this proud nation of ours—spending on disability and health conditions is the second highest in the G7.

Universal credit is a comprehensive system, bringing about the much-needed modernisation of a dated and discredited welfare system. I have not found it to represent the draconian approach that some have suggested—that their experiences of it are clearly different from mine—and I am encouraged by the much greater flexibility it offers in helping people return, where appropriate, to the dignity and self-esteem that employment must surely bring.

I am optimistic about the future of universal credit, should Ministers continue, as they have thus far, to listen and respond to concerns or suggestions from Members of this House, jobcentre staff and, most importantly, those who themselves rely on the support afforded by the welfare system in the United Kingdom.

7.35 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and thanking the Backbench Business Committee for enabling us to hold this important debate.

I was taken aback by the roseate picture that the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) gave us. It does not square with my experience in my constituency, and I want to outline why. The problem of cuts to disability benefit has affected a lot of my constituents very badly indeed. That is largely because, although Durham is no longer a mining area, it has a legacy of heavy industry. Healthy life expectancy across the country as a whole may be 69 years; in County Durham it is 59. That means that many people under pension age are in need of support from the social security system and need disability benefits.

One problem results from the interactions with other parts of the benefit system. Those are serious and complex. Obviously, the bedroom tax—which we debated at length in 2014—has adversely affected those people who needed a spare room for a carer in their family, which they are now financially penalised for using. Another group of people who are badly affected are the WASPI women. I had a fantastic meeting with 300 WASPI women in my constituency. Some people who turned up were hale and hearty, but a considerable number were seriously ill and had a disability. Some of them were working at the age of 15; their bodies are now worn out. The Minister must know that that is an issue because she has noted the significant increase in the number of women over 55 who have had to go on to ESA.

One woman who recently came to see me had to stop work because she had cancer and her doctor said she could no longer do a part-time job. Because her job had been part time, she was not entitled to contributory ESA. Because she has an occupational pension of £60 a week, she is not entitled to any other money from the social security system.

A family came to see me. The mother was disqualified from benefit when she moved from DLA to PIP. At the stroke of a pen she lost that benefit, her son lost carer’s allowance and they lost housing benefit. They were losing £8,000 a year. Their income was halved by the change in assessment.

Then, as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth said, we had the problem of the Motability cuts. Everybody wants to help and support people who go out to work when they have a disability. The cuts to Motability have been one of the most destructive, futile and pointless cuts one could possibly dream up. A young woman came to see me. She had dwarfism. She had succeeded in getting a university degree and holding down a job. When her Motability was taken from her, of course her whole life was thrown into chaos. Then we had the benefit freezes, which adversely affect this group of people. We are now seeing people with disabilities and chronic illnesses being moved on to universal credit, gradually at first but there will be more in future. That means there is another group of people who will be suffering from the delays to benefit payments and pushed into debt. When Ministers talk about being fiscally responsible, having a welfare cut and the fantastic savings they have got out of the social security budget, the truth is that those savings have been achieved on the backs of people like my constituents with severe disabilities and health problems.

I want to talk in particular about the move from DLA to PIP and ESA. I cannot think of a worse-named benefit than PIP: it’s not really personal, it doesn’t give people independence and there isn’t much of a payment if they do manage to get it. There is massive confusion among the public, some of whom thought they were entitled to DLA for life. Some people who received higher-level DLA now have zero points and receive no PIP whatever. My constituency caseworker, who has dealt with hundreds of cases over the past couple of years, has an 82% success rate on appeals—82% of decisions are being overturned.
Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the fact that in Wales 75% of PIP and 74% of ESA decisions were overturned on appeal in 2017? Does that not lead to the conclusion that this is an utterly dysfunctional and shambolic system, which is a huge waste of resources and taxpayers’ money? It is not only callous and cruel—it is not value for money.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend expresses it very well. I did not know the statistics relating to Wales. Wales and Durham are obviously having a very similar experience, which is perhaps not surprising as Wales is another area where people are coping with a heavy industry legacy.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): In Swansea, some of the most vulnerable people are going through the most dreadful anguish and anxiety. They are chronically ill, yet they think they will not end up with benefits. Is that not part of a wider strategy to squeeze the poorest and most vulnerable to pay for the bankers’ greed, which led to the 2008 financial crisis?

Helen Goodman: It is extraordinary that the Government have been able to find the money to cut inheritance tax for the richest, but they cannot find money for people with disabilities and mental health problems.

As my hon. Friends have said, the stress and distress caused, particularly to people with mental health problems, are a serious problem. People are put into a situation of tension because they do not know when or whether they are going to be reassessed. I have constituents who are concerned for their family members’ wellbeing, because they get so anxious and cannot face the work capability assessments.

Let me now turn to the problem of ESA. The hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock talked about how we need to encourage and support people back into work. That is indeed true, but the fact is that, from the point of view of an employer, employing people with disabilities means higher employee liability insurance, it very often means adjustments at work and there is simply no incentive for people—[Interruption.] The Minister is saying, “Rubbish!” from a sedentary position. Would he like to come to the Dispatch Box and tell me why that is rubbish?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): Both as a Member of Parliament in my constituency office and as somebody who ran a business for 10 years, I employed disabled people and I benefited. It takes good employers to have a wide-ranging workforce. If you get it right it is a win-win for everybody. I do not recognise the situation the hon. Lady sets out.

Helen Goodman: I am glad the Minister did as he did, but we do also hear from people who cannot get jobs because of their disabilities and from employers who say it is too expensive to make the adjustments.

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): On the point about it being too expensive, does the hon. Lady recognise the support to work schemes that the Government have introduced and which now can reach up to £57,000 per employee, which can help to negate some of those costs and support disabled people in work?

Helen Goodman: If those schemes were so good, the proportion of people with disabilities in work would have gone up, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth, who opened the debate, pointed out, it has not increased one jot in the last eight years.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend is right. She will recall that the gap between the employment rate for disabled people and the overall average was falling steadily until 2010, and she will know that it has flattened ever since. Does she share my disappointment that the Government no longer have a target for reducing the disability employment gap—the target initially set by David Cameron but since abandoned, unfortunately?

Helen Goodman: My right hon. Friend, who had a proud record as a Minister tackling these issues in the previous Labour Government, points out the twists and turns of policy. It is patently ridiculous for Ministers, following the UN report, to be complacent in this area. There is no room for complacency.

I wish to illustrate the problem of ESA with some stories of constituents of mine. Mrs M, 63, had to stop working as a carer because of ill health. She was signed off by her GP. She has Paget’s disease and a tumour on her leg. She sees an oncologist. She needs a new hip. She is seeing a surgeon because she needs a new knee. She has heart arrhythmia on the left side and sees a cardiologist. She was refused ESA at assessment and had to apply for JSA, and she was advised to apply for jobs as a roofer and bouncer or to consider retraining as a social worker. Obviously, we supported her appeal, and ESA was awarded. It is patently ridiculous that people have to go through this sort of thing.

Mr C, 60, had previously been awarded DLA following a series of strokes. He was transferred to PIP in January 2018 and awarded a high rate for both care and mobility. He put in an ESA assessment request in September 2018, but he got confused because all his medical information had been sent to DWP for the PIP assessment, and he was then expected to pay again for the medical evidence for the ESA application. Why can the Department not sort out its administration, instead of putting these financial burdens on to our vulnerable constituents?

Mr I, 64, was previously awarded PIP and was reassessed in 2018. The award was unchanged—eight points for mobility because he cannot walk 50 metres unaided—but his ESA assessment in October 2018 failed because he could move 200 metres using a wheelchair. He is currently awaiting a mandatory reconsideration. One of the confusions is that people cannot understand how they can be awarded a high award in the PIP assessment but then be required to work under the ESA assessment. It does not stack up. One reason it does not stack up is the amateurish and unqualified nature of the staff doing the assessments. This has been a problem from the off. Ministers have had eight years to sort it out, but they have failed.
Let me tell the story of Mr J. Mr J is autistic and has various mental impairments. He had been receiving DLA, but was moved to PIP. He applied for ESA and was placed in the support group. He was unaware that his ESA was contribution-based rather than income-based. When he went to the chemist and was given the prescription form, he ticked the box because he had previously been entitled to free prescriptions, but that was no longer the case. A fine was issued, which the family had to pay. Mr J’s mother had to intervene and become the appointee to deal with the issue, as Mr J was plainly not capable of doing so himself.

Mr J is not a one-off. He is not unusual. Five years ago, 30,000 people were fined for falsely saying that they were entitled to NHS prescriptions. Last year the figure was 1 million, and it was 1 million because the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions are not properly co-ordinated. The Department for Work and Pensions does not give people the information that they need when they receive their benefits, and the Department of Health and Social Care is hounding them for money. For the Minister, on a nice ministerial salary of £98,000 a year, a £100 fine might not be a lot, but for people with incomes of £100-£150, it is a whole week’s income.

This is a complete disgrace. It is utterly careless. We have been raising the issue with Ministers for the last six months and they have still not sorted it out. Of course I am not saying that Ministers set out to fine a million people—that would be a ridiculous assertion—but it is sometimes culpable to be careless, and this Government are careless of disabled people.

7.51 pm

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): If I may, I will bring the debate back to the actual motion, which calls on the Government to commission an independent assessment of the cumulative impact of changes to the social security system. This is an important issue, and it is right that we should discuss it today. Let me add that it is an honour to follow the impassioned speech of the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

Of course we must ensure that the social security system works for everyone. It should be a safety net to help those who have fallen on hard times, but it should also help people to stand on their own two feet. When they cannot do that, it should be there to support them and enable them to lead decent lives.

If we are to consider the motion properly, we must recognise that, because of the Government’s actions, disability spending will be higher in every year to 2020, relative to both 2010 and today. Thanks to their reforms, the average weekly award of PIP is more than £13 higher than the old DLA award, and 87% of claimants say that they are satisfied with their claimant journeys. In this year alone, £50 billion will be spent to support people with disabilities and health conditions. There are further achievements that I could stand here and natter on about, but for the sake of brevity, I will merely say that the Government have a strong track record on disability support.

Moreover, the NHS, which has now been given a record level of funding thanks to this Government, will continue to offer unparalleled care to people with poor health. As for carers, their allowance has increased from £116 to £120 a week since 2010. There is more support for carers, and it has grown faster than wages. In the context of the motion—to which I return again—that is very good news. The changes will almost certainly have a positive impact within the wider social security system, and will benefit sick and disabled people and their families and carers. I do not think we need an independent assessment to tell us that.

Let me make a quick point about universal credit. I believe that the purpose of any social security system should be to help people into work and give them the satisfaction that work provides, rather than creating yet another culture of dependency that the country simply cannot afford. It is estimated that universal credit will help 200,000 more people into work when it is fully rolled out, and will empower people to work an extra 113 million hours a year. For disabled people specifically, they have boosted income of about £110 a month thanks to the increased support under UC.

I had a recent case of a disabled gentleman who was struggling to find outreach support from the jobcentre. With the assistance of a local councillor we were able to help this gentleman. I raised this case with the Secretary of State this week, and I am pleased that she said that she would look at ways to promote that outreach so that people are aware of the services offered at our jobcentres.

Ruth George: The hon. Gentleman is painting an extremely rosy picture of circumstances in Clacton. Is he aware of the visit a month ago to Clacton of the UN special rapporteur on poverty, and his report on the serious poverty he found there and the lack of support for people, including those with disabilities?

Giles Watling: Of course I am aware of the visit of the UN rapporteur, whom I met for two hours. He spent, I think, two hours in Jaywick, where there absolutely are problems; he arrived, spoke to the people of Jaywick and went away in two hours. That shows total disrespect for the staff and the officers of the local council who have been working so hard for so long to improve the situation in Jaywick. We are building 10 more houses there: five for council housing and five starter homes. We have bought 30 hectares of land and we are expanding our works in Jaywick, and things in Jaywick are improving. Moreover the rapporteur’s visit irritated the people of Jaywick greatly; it irritated them that somebody yet again has come to Jaywick, looked at it and said, “This is a bad place to live.” No, it is not; it is a wonderful place to live with a wonderful community who are on the up at the moment. I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, as I enjoyed that hugely.

We were the party that introduced the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, a groundbreaking Act that was subsequently amended and replaced by the Equality Act 2010. On the specific point about an independent assessment, it is because of the chain of legislative changes that we started that all Departments and public bodies now have a responsibility for considering and
monitoring the impact of policies on disabled people. This is the case for all policy, not just disability-related policies.

Finally—and this is the crucial point—if we commission this assessment, we must recognise that the DWP does not believe it is methodologically sound to publish a cumulative impact separately for disabled people. The main reasons are that the Department’s survey data are limited, particularly in terms of capturing the severity of disability, and because most people live in households with others, the Department does not know how incomes are shared. It is very hard to look at effects separately for the disabled. That will be the case for an independent body, too, so there is no point in commissioning a flawed and inaccurate assessment; that helps nobody.

7.58 pm

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I congratulate my colleague the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this important debate and I appreciate the Backbench Business Committee’s granting it.

This is an interesting situation, because I support some elements of UC. I remember supporting it in the coalition. There were elements of it that I pointed out at the time would cause problems. Some of what I said was taken on board, but unfortunately some was not and we have reaped the whirlwind all these years later. A key element of UC that I supported avidly was around working allowance, and I was disappointed that that was cut to ribbons in 2015, although I was delighted only a few months ago that £1.7 billion was restored, if not the full amount. So, there has been a bit of progress.

I worked with my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth—I call her my hon. Friend even though we are in different parties—on the Work and Pensions Committee between 2010 and 2015, and we saw a lot of things in the same light. That is one of the reasons that I think today’s request is not unreasonable. Anyone who was born with a disability or acquired it when very young faces an enormous challenge to get work. I know this because I have been working in this area for more than 30 years. After the kerfuffle earlier today, I should tell the House that I have been hard of hearing for 50 years and I am quite a good lipspeaker. I have kept silent about that, however. I decided that there was enough Sturm und Drang without my chucking any more into it. I am going to rise above that.

Disabled people face barriers to employment, to education and in many other areas. A Conservative Member made the point that it was the Conservatives in the early 1990s who introduced the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. I know that well, because I helped to campaign for it, all those years ago when I was young and had no grey hair. I met John Major at the time, and he was very impressive on the issue. The DDA was a huge game changer. Without that law, we would not have made anywhere near the number of advances on disability discrimination in services and employment that we have in fact made. However, there is a long way to go, and that is often because people do not understand the barriers that disabled people face.

Governments on all sides often point out that, under the DDA, someone who acquires a disability while working can keep their job. That is a great thing, and it is really important, but I know loads of disabled people who would give their right arm just to get in the door and be given a job. The system is now much better at protecting people who, sadly, acquire a disability through illness, for example, and that represents fantastic progress. However, the thing that has not changed in all the years I have been in politics, and all the years before that when I was involved in this area, is that it is still incredibly hard for a disabled person to get a job.

On top of that, people have to deal with the incredibly unwise move by the DWP a couple of years ago—before the present Ministers were in situ—to change elements of the capability assessment. The Government kept the support group and a couple of the other groups, but they changed the part of the employment and support allowance that helps disabled people to get work. They changed the income so that it was the same as that of jobseeker’s allowance, or just above it, rather than retaining the higher amount that was available to the support group. That was such a foolish move. I was not an MP at the time—I had a brief two-year period after 2015 when I was not an MP, then I came back—and I remember writing to my colleagues and to the then Ministers about the decision.

Human nature is human nature, and if the additional payment is reduced by 20% for disabled people who are prepared to try to find work, with support, those people will of course strive darn hard to get into the support group. That is not wrong; that is what happens. If I had been off work for six or seven years, and I had been persuaded by my work coach at the Jobcentre Plus to go into an ESA cohort that would give me a little more money than pure JSA—a little less than in the support group but more than JSA—I would be willing to go into that group because there would be more income and also because the work coach would be there to help me to find work. If the rules were then changed, so that my money was exactly the same as it would be on JSA, I would try to stay in the support group—it would be bonkers not to, to be perfectly honest. That is just human nature. That was really frustrating, so I was not surprised to learn that there have been real problems in that area over the ensuing years, and that a lot of people have moved over to the support group who perhaps would not have done so.

There are still some really odd anomalies. I have recently been helping a constituent who had worked for the DWP at the local Jobcentre Plus for x number of years. Unfortunately he became ill, and after a few years it was clear that his illness was stopping him working effectively, even part time. The DWP did its best to help him through the process, but eventually he was let go, under proper due process—I have no complaints about that, and neither did he. Two years later he was on ESA and had to go for a work capability assessment, because the DWP’s system had said, “No, you’re not disabled enough to have these benefits.” He was disabled enough to be made redundant but not disabled enough a few years later to actually get the benefits, which was ridiculous. I do not believe that it was conspicious; I believe that it was classic dim bureaucracy. I try to provide support at tribunals where possible, so one member of my office team—I am training up a second colleague—joined my
constituent to act as an advocate at tribunal. He won and is now getting all the benefits to which he is entitled.

My point is that that clunkiness happens more often for someone who is disabled. I know so much about this subject, having worked with so many thousands of people over the years, so that is why I believe we need an assessment. I do not think that is unreasonable. I do not agree with all the things that it is suggested are required. My colleague the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth would be surprised if I agreed with her on everything, but I agree with her on this. We need a specific assessment of the impact that the changes are having on disabled people. If we do not have that, I fear for the really huge migration—the million migration—although I accept that the Government have been making some good amendments to universal credit, sometimes through gritted teeth. That is why I do not think that it is unreasonable to ask for an independent impact assessment that is focused on disabled people.

Debbie Abrahams: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Centre for Welfare Reform recently published an analysis of the Government’s reasons for not producing a cumulative impact assessment? In summary, it found no good reason why the Government should not evaluate the combined impact of their policies.

Stephen Lloyd: I was not aware of that, but it makes my case perfectly. As the hon. Lady knows, that is a good lobby group, from a different perspective—from the right of centre. What we have is left of centre, centre—an empty void these days, but that is by the by—and right of centre all telling the Government to have the impact assessment.

Giles Watling: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if the impact assessment is based on faulty data, and therefore comes up with faulty answers, it is not worth having?

Stephen Lloyd: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman, with genuine respect, that I think the Department is spinning to him on that. I know a lot about disability statistics, including all the different Government and DWP statistics, and I do not believe that it would be beyond the wit of man to come up with the model that gets over the particular hurdle he has talked about. My view is that the hurdle is not as dramatic as the DWP is saying. We might have to agree to disagree, but I genuinely believe that, and I have worked a lot with the DWP over the years under different Governments.

I will now close, as I know others wish to speak. The request for an independent assessment is not unreasonable, and it would do the Government credit to accept it. On that basis, I hope the Minister is listening.

8.10 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), who is clearly well informed on these issues and who shares my love of statistics.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing this debate. Opposition Members have talked about the UN report and the Government’s supposed complacency, and I make it clear that, in the 18 months I have been here, not one of my colleagues or I have been complacent about the welfare policies we see play out in our constituencies every single day. I will elaborate on some of the areas where I think we are doing quite well and on other areas where there is still scope for further reform, on which I am sure colleagues will want to work with me and, of course, with Ministers in trying to deliver.

We are having this debate against the backdrop of significant changes to our welfare policy. DLA is being phased through to PIP, along with attendance allowance for pensioners with care needs. We have seen a big difference in how the money is being spent, too.

Some Opposition Members have criticised the Government, saying that costs have been cut on the backs of the most vulnerable in our society. I have heard that allegation made against Ministers time and again, which is why I went to the Library to look at the overall expenditure within our welfare system. Breaking it down, around £10.3 billion was being spent on DLA in 2009-10—we did not have PIP in 2009-10—and in 2017-18 around £16 billion was being spent on DLA plus PIP. In cash terms, there has not been a reduction in overall expenditure.

The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who is no longer in her place, said that we are cutting costs on the backs of the most vulnerable, which is neither fair nor accurate. If we are to have a proper debate on how to help the most vulnerable in our society, we should speak to the right facts. The facts and statistics have come up as an issue time and again, including in the House this week. We owe it to all our constituents to speak to the facts, and if Opposition Members dispute the facts, they should take it up with the Library.

In looking at how the policies have come across, not only has the way in which the money is distributed changed, but so has how services are delivered. What has happened with a lot of the welfare reforms—I have seen it, and my constituents have come to my office to speak about it—is that many people on legacy benefits are, for the very first time, having some of the assumptions challenged and being asked for reassessments. Sometimes that is for the good, but sometimes there has been a detrimental impact where they have fallen through the different changes. They might have had a change of circumstances, or they might have moved between counties or to different parts of the country, which has had a negative impact. I have asked questions of Ministers in the House to try to tackle those issues.

Debbie Abrahams: How many disabled people were supported by the social security system in 2009, and how many are supported now? It is important to have the denominator value so that we have a rate, not just cash values.

Luke Graham: I could not agree more. I find it interesting that we have had an increase of around 800,000 people aged 16 to 64 who are now being classified as disabled. I understand that they had previous classifications within the welfare system and were receiving different benefits, so a simple change in the denominator would not indicate the impact.
The Government have made commitments to people in receipt of cash benefits. It is a fair point. The hon. Lady asked me a direct question, and I gave her a direct answer. Again, I would happily debate the number of people who are now being classified as disabled.

There have been some positive movements in the Government’s changes. We have seen the employment rate for disabled people go up from 43% to 51%, which is welcome. I referred to Access to Work earlier, and £104 million went into the scheme in 2016-17, providing support to around 25,000 people.

Again, no Conservative Member is complacent. We are very clear that changes still need to be made. A number of my constituents have talked to me about their experiences of the assessment process, taking me through the paperwork. I have gone through that page by page with them to understand where they are having difficulties. From that, we can see that some of these changes have brought people into our offices; they have brought them into the welfare system. For a long time, they have lagged in the dark, whereas now assumptions are being challenged and new benefits are being offered. As a result, new questions are coming from our constituents, and we should try to answer them as best we can.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for giving a far more honest portrayal of his experience of his constituents than other Government Members. May I just challenge a point he made earlier about the figures? Of course, when he refers to these figures, he is being somewhat selective. The rate of inflation means costs have risen since 2010, so naturally the costs, output and spend he refers to will be higher, but that does not necessarily mean that people are not being affected disproportionately.

Luke Graham: We are looking at a 38% increase in cash terms, but if the compound inflation rate over the same period is taken into account, this would come out as less than 38%. I am happy to go through the calculations with the hon. Lady separately, but we would still find a real-terms increase in the benefits that are being paid out.

On all these policies, we, as constituency MPs, see the impact on disabled people, because we are putting in a considerable amount of money. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) made the point about the amount being spent on disabled benefits, and we are one of the highest spenders in the developed world, which should be applauded, but if the money is not getting to the right people at the right time, we need to see exactly how it is being administered and how our services are being delivered on the frontline right across our country.

Like other Members here, I have hosted debates on Disability Confident, which is a fantastic scheme. The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) talked about how MPs should be signing up for that. My office is a member of the scheme and the same applies to colleagues from right across the House. The Minister visited the Glenalmond Timber Company in my constituency, and I hope everyone will be able to join me in congratulating Jed Gardner, its production manager, who now has Disability Confident leader status—the first in Scotland. I hope everyone will congratulate him on the fantastic work being done in Methven to give people with disabilities opportunities to work. When I visited the company and when the Minister did, too, we could clearly see the impact this has on not only individuals, but their family and friends. So some incredibly positive work is being done by this Government, although there are also areas where we need to review and assess continually.

Furthermore, in my constituency, we recently held a joint event with my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) on Disability Confident in Alloa, which the local community and the DWP attended. It was hosted in Inglewood House, which, I am glad to say, signed up to the Disability Confident scheme immediately following that event. Again, that is an incredibly positive action, showing that companies in Clackmannanshire, Perth and Kinross are taking Government initiatives from the green Benches here and applying them in a daily way where we can see real improvement in our constituents’ lives.

As I said, I have a number of concerns about how the assessment is taking place, and I would support looking at having an assessment of how these things are being delivered. I hope to work with my Government colleagues on how that would be done. I hope that such an assessment would be independent, or certainly objective, to make sure that our constituents, our Government and ourselves will have the best possible view on how these disability benefits are being delivered.

Kate Green: Does the hon. Gentleman agree with the recommendation in the Work and Pensions Committee’s report published this week that, while someone is waiting for a work capability assessment, it is unreasonable of the Department not to pay universal credit, because that is leaving people high and dry?

Luke Graham: The short answer is yes. I led the inquiry on universal credit in the Public Accounts Committee, and I refer all Members to the inquiry and subsequent report, where we identified the strengths and shortfalls of the UC system. I hope that Government colleagues have read that report and taken those recommendations into account.

I wish to make one or two final points before summarising. We have talked a lot about statistics. One concern I have—this is often not appreciated in this House—is that the devolution of certain levels of statistics around the country means we often have different levels of government in the UK producing different statistics, which makes like-for-like comparisons quite difficult. When preparing for this debate and for the mental health debate that was pulled, I struggled to get figures from the Library, because in Scotland we are now not going along with certain NHS quality-for-delivery frameworks. Even if different parts of the United Kingdom and different levels of government use different methods, we have to find a statistical method to find a uniform measure so that we can have a meaningful debate in this place. Otherwise, we are not comparing apples with apples and we cannot get a real view of how services are being delivered for our constituents.
In that same vein, the devolution of welfare powers has been debated in the past, and I am sure that the debate will be ongoing in this place in the coming years. I have a real concern about the devolution of welfare powers—not because I think that all powers should remain here and I want to sit on the green-Bench throne, but because when we speak to the most vulnerable people in our constituencies, as I know every Member does, we find out that adding another agency or two into the equation would make it even more difficult for them to get the help that they need.

I support this issue, because we should have an objective assessment of what these changes are doing for our constituents and for the most vulnerable people. We are spending the money, but we have to make sure that it goes to the right place. For too long, benefits have been a party political issue. When it comes to disability and goes to the right place. For too long, benefits have been a party political issue. When it comes to disability and
go to the right place. For too long, benefits have been a party political issue. When it comes to disability and
go to the right place. For too long, benefits have been a party political issue. When it comes to disability and

When we raise these problems with the Government, we get the same response time after time: they do not recognise these big problems and will carry on regardless. They are like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand. But that is indicative of the Government’s track record: they carry on until they are shamed into doing something about it. What can be more shaming than when a United Nations poverty envoy says that changes to social security have meant that “great misery has also been inflicted unnecessarily, especially on the working poor, on single mothers struggling against mighty odds, on people with disabilities who are already marginalized, and on millions of children who are being locked into a cycle of poverty”?

That was published in his report.

It is appalling and inexcusable that this is happening in a G7 country. Our social security system is there as a safety net for the most vulnerable people. Right now, that safety net is failing. MPs, the EHRC and the United Nations have all called on the Government to conduct a cumulative impact assessment. If the Government are so confident that they are doing the right thing, they have nothing to fear over commissioning this assessment. Ultimately, the Government must stop burying their head in the sand over this and wake up to the reality that their punitive and callous policies are causing misery and hardship to hundreds of my constituents and hundreds of thousands of people across the country.

8.21 pm

Stephen Kinnight (Aberavon) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) and for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing this important debate.

On a daily basis, my office sees at first hand the horrendous and appalling impact that the Government’s changes to the social security system have had on some of the most vulnerable people in my Aberavon constituency. Many of my constituents who come to my advice surgeries are at their wits’ end, worried that their benefits are going to be stopped and that they will not be able to pay their rent or put food on the table for their children. We have seen hundreds of vulnerable constituents put through the humiliation of shambolic health assessments that cast doubts on their physical disabilities or mental health issues. Following that humiliation is the awful uncertainty and fear of the appeals process, which we almost always win.

Some people have been awarded no points following PIP or ESA assessments, when it is quite clear that they are struggling with a disability, or when information has been inaccurately recorded. This has eroded confidence in not only the assessment process but the whole system. Universal credit has landed people in rent arrears for the very first time. Some people’s experiences are simply harrowing.

In one case, a woman who had suffered with a degenerative disc condition for 27 years, along with depression and anxiety, waited for more than a year for her ESA assessment, only to have it cancelled on the day. A month later, she was assessed, but the anxiety and stress of the wait, followed by the degrading assessment itself, led to a mini-stroke two days after the assessment. She now has high blood pressure, which puts her at risk of a further stroke. Despite all that, she was put into the work-related category. That decision was overturned following a mandatory reconsideration. She is not alone in having had to go through this process. In Wales in 2017, 75% of PIP decisions and 74% of ESA decisions were overturned on appeal. This is symptomatic of the fundamental flaws in the initial assessment process. If the correct decisions were made from the outset, a lot of the misery, worry and suffering would be avoided.

When we raise these problems with the Government, we get the same response time after time: they do not recognise these big problems and will carry on regardless. They are like an ostrich with its head buried in the sand. But that is indicative of the Government’s track record: they carry on until they are shamed into doing something about it. What can be more shaming than when a United Nations poverty envoy says that changes to social security have meant that “great misery has also been inflicted unnecessarily, especially on the working poor, on single mothers struggling against mighty odds, on people with disabilities who are already marginalized, and on millions of children who are being locked into a cycle of poverty”?

That was published in his report.

It is appalling and inexcusable that this is happening in a G7 country. Our social security system is there as a safety net for the most vulnerable people. Right now, that safety net is failing. MPs, the EHRC and the United Nations have all called on the Government to conduct a cumulative impact assessment. If the Government are so confident that they are doing the right thing, they have nothing to fear over commissioning this assessment. Ultimately, the Government must stop burying their head in the sand over this and wake up to the reality that their punitive and callous policies are causing misery and hardship to hundreds of my constituents and hundreds of thousands of people across the country.
not be fully protected, and I am already seeing constituents who are losing out simply because of a change in circumstances.

Promises about future backdated transitional payments ring hollow when a person cannot afford the rent because their universal credit claim is in disarray three months after moving to a bungalow adapted for their disability. Rent arrears have spiralled. In one case, a blind constituent was informed only in writing that universal credit now included an element for rent. No one contacted her to inform her verbally.

I want to pay tribute to the persistence and resilience of my constituents who daily face the challenge of their medical conditions and who must also deal with the current benefits system. I applaud those who have come to accept that a mandatory reconsideration and an appeal to Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service are just part of the claims process. My constituent who informed me that he has completed his third successful appeal has my admiration and respect. However, there are far too many others who simply do not carry on with their claims, who get ground down by the bureaucracy, who miss out on vital financial support and whose health, as others have mentioned, suffers greatly as a consequence.

Of course the Government should commission an independent cumulative assessment of the impact of changes in the social security system on sick and disabled people, their families and carers, but they should also act now, immediately stopping the roll out of universal credit to ill or disabled people.

8.29 pm

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): Government Members appear to be arguing that there should not be a cumulative impact assessment for disabled people for which my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) has argued so eloquently.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton) indicated dissent.

Ruth George: I am glad that the Minister is disagreeing and I very much hope that she will put me right and will agree to this.

There are plenty of figures out there. We know that 30% of families including someone with a disability are in poverty. That is 10% higher than the rest of the population. In fact, according to the Social Mobility Commission, half of people in poverty—nearly 7 million people—are in a household with an adult who has a disability. Fixing the problems of poverty for people with disabilities will go a long way to fixing the problems of the UK’s high level of poverty.

Over the last eight years, we have seen successive cuts to benefits that affect people with disabilities. From 2013, we saw a 1% benefit uprating for three years. Employment and support allowance lost over 5% of its value compared to the retail prices index and 3% compared to the consumer prices index. The four-year benefits freeze will take off 6.5% compared to the CPI and a full 10% compared to the RPI; 15% of the value of that benefit will be lost over seven years. These are not generous benefits in the first place.

In addition, many disabled people have had to cope with the cuts to local housing allowance, which is down to 30% of median rents. They therefore have to bulk up their rent out of their meagre ESA. Child tax credit has been frozen. The childcare element in tax credits has been at the same maximum since 2005, and the amount of help people can get with childcare costs has reduced from 80% to 70%. In addition we have the bedroom tax, which affects so many people with disabilities, and £30 a week has been abolished for those in the work-related activity group under ESA.

People with disabilities have been facing all those cuts, even before the cuts under universal credit. That is why people with disabilities feel so strongly that there needs to be a cumulative impact assessment of the full impact of the history of serious cuts to their income. Under universal credit, we are also seeing cuts that affect children with disabilities. The Government claim to support and protect the most vulnerable in society, but my constituent—a single parent with a son with a disability—wrote to me saying, “My son is six years old. He is practically bed-bound, yet the Government want to transfer me on to universal credit because I can no longer work to support him, and his support will be reduced. If my disabled son is not one of the most vulnerable people who needs protection and support, then who is?” I put that question to the Minister today.

The difficulties in claiming universal credit for people with disabilities have been set out in many cases elsewhere, but because roll-out so far has been mostly to people who have been on JSA—not to people with disabilities on employment and support allowance—we have seen the scale of support that is needed. However, as I mentioned earlier, I am already seeing problems in my constituency with regards to people with disabilities getting the home visits that they feel they need.

Families in particular are feeling the cuts, including parents who are disabled with children who are disabled. My hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth set out the appalling level of cuts—a reduction in income of nearly £10,000 a year—that those families will see under universal credit. It is no wonder that families fear universal credit. A constituent with a four-year-old son who is autistic and non-verbal wrote to me to say that she has had to give up work to care for him because she cannot get care in the school holidays, so as well as losing her own wage, she has also lost tax credits. The family looked to claim housing benefit, but found that they would need to claim universal credit instead. Given that they have already racked up rent arrears because their income has been so reduced, if they faced five weeks’ wait for support under universal credit, they could end up losing the house they have been tenants in for the last 21 years. I hope that the Government will be listening to these real stories of people who are already suffering. I have had universal credit in my constituency for only two and a half months, and I am already seeing constituents who are suffering under it.

That is on top of all the constituents who are suffering from employment support allowance and PIP assessments. In the Work and Pensions Committee, I set out to the Minister the very harrowing account that I had heard of a group of survivors of sexual violence and their experiences of PIP assessments—how one woman was curled up on the floor crying and sobbing uncontrollably while the assessor simply repeated the questions at her deadpan...
and offered her no support or understanding whatsoever. I was very pleased that the Minister agreed that that was a disgusting situation that should not be allowed to continue. In response to the Committee’s report on PIP and ESA assessments, the Government promised to look at the recording of those assessments and to bring that in. However, on questioning the permanent secretary today in the Committee, we heard that he had no idea how that was being rolled out, although the commitment to do so was made eight months ago.

A constituent who was looking to claim PIP said that she was forced to purchase her own recording equipment if she wanted her assessment to be recorded, whereas she knows that in the past the assessment centre had used its own equipment. She was also looking to get support with getting to the assessment centre. She was told that she could get there in a taxi but that it would cost £100 up-front and she could only claim that back 30 days after her assessment. People with disabilities are not being treated in the way that they should be treated. I am afraid that this is a culture that we are coming across time and again in what we hear in our constituency surgeries.

The Disability Benefits Consortium found that eight out of 10 people who underwent a PIP assessment found that it made their health worse. Two thirds felt that they had been poorly assessed. Constituents with mental health difficulties, in particular, find that those difficulties are not adequately assessed. One constituent said that, although she presented with serious mental health difficulties, the bulk of the questions she was asked were aimed at her physical health, where she has only minor conditions that do not prevent her from working. Only a third of the time was spent covering her mental health, and those questions were loaded. When she tried to expand and explain her answers, she was told to stick to the questions.

My constituent has been left on the verge of suicide by that assessment and the struggle of waiting for a response as to what will happen as a result. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth set out so starkly, there has been an increase in suicides by people who have been undergoing work capability and PIP assessments. None of us want to see this happen. In Committee, I raised with the Minister the fact that constituents of mine were being asked why they had not yet committed suicide. I was very pleased that she again took up the issue. That question has not come up in the cases that I have received more recently, so I very much hope that that practice is spreading across time and again in what we hear in our constituency surgeries.

Dr Cameron: The hon. Lady is making an extremely powerful speech. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for disability, and we have heard that there are particular difficulties for people with acquired brain injury and epilepsy in relation to the types of questions asked in assessments. Does she agree that assessments should be more sensitive to the different types of disability?

Ruth George: The hon. Lady makes a very relevant point. The evidence from my constituents with mental health issues and brain injuries is that assessments are centred on physical health and physical difficulties. I know from my 20 years working for the shop workers’ union, USDAW, that work is not easy these days, particularly for people with long-term health conditions. Employers now have sickness absence procedures, and employees often cannot have more than three periods of sickness absence, however short, in any six-month period. People with disabilities—particularly those who do not have a union representative to support them under the Equality Act 2010—are simply slipping through the net, not performing and being left out of the workplace.

Unfortunately, universal credit and the cuts to that benefit will trap people who have disabilities more without work, and particularly those who are on a higher-level benefit with premiums and then take up a short period of work. For example, one of my constituents took a job working for Royal Mail for six weeks over the Christmas period, because he felt relatively well and wanted to do it. He has just found out that when he finishes that job, he will be transferred on to universal credit and will lose his transitional protection and support. That is not a message that says to people with disabilities, “Try to work. Try to do your best.”

We see even more problems with the system where people with disabilities are being refused work capability assessments and are not seeing any money at all. One of my constituents was presented to me by a support charity six months ago. It has been trying for six months to get him some money, since he failed his ESA assessment. He had a fit note and should have been getting money. Only with my intervention did he get support. For six months, he was living off friends, family and food bank parcels.

Stephen Timms: I wonder whether my hon. Friend saw this comment from Professor Alston in his report: “great misery has also been inflicted unnecessarily…on people with disabilities who are already marginalized”.

Ministers have sought to dismiss that criticism, but does that not sum up pretty well the experience of a very large number of people up and down the country?

Ruth George: I thank my right hon. Friend for making that important point, on which I was going to end my speech.

I want to quote a constituent with a disability who wrote to me to set out her experience. She was not asking for support—she was able to fight the system—but she said:

“The reason I’m writing to you is to encourage you to keep fighting for us in Westminster, to be the voice that is being taken away from the disabled people in this country. Fight to put an end to this barbaric, humiliating assessment system, where the person who makes life or death decisions doesn’t even get to meet you, isn’t medically qualified (specific to the individual condition) and is meeting targets to refuse claims.”

That is the view of people with disabilities. They want Parliament to be seen to be supporting them. The changes to universal credit in the Budget did not affect people with disabilities, who are some of the worst impacted by cuts to universal credit. I very much hope that the Minister and the Government are listening.

8.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I am pleased to contribute to the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing it.
Benefits are the biggest issue in my office. I have one member of staff who does nothing else but deal with benefits five days a week; to be honest, she works outside her hours because she is a compassionate lady. The rest of us in the office, including myself, have done DLA appeals, and we still continue to do them. We deal with the benefits system as well, and these are incredibly difficult issues. The Government have indicated that they will review some of the universal credit system, and may I say that that cannot come soon enough?

I want to say something to the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), who is in his place, and to the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, who has left but will no doubt be back shortly. I am not saying this to give them a big head, but both Ministers are very affable and engaging, and they do try to address the issues. I know that because I have spoken to them both. They have come to me to say, “Look, if there’s anything at all that you want to speak about, please speak to us about those things”.

Both the Ministers are keen and eager to help—I say that in advance because I do not want them to think I am attacking them, because I am not doing so—but there are things I have to say tonight about universal credit and where it is, and the fact that it is having an impact on my constituents. It would be remiss of me to come to this Chamber and not to say that. I wanted to say that first, because I know the Under-Secretary always responds; he knows that, because I have spoken to him before about it. None the less, we are where we are on these issues.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has done a very in-depth analysis, which I and others have read; indeed, some right hon. and hon. Members have referred to it. It shows that the bottom two deciles will lose, on average, approximately 10% of their net income, with much smaller losses for those higher up the income distribution. Negative impacts are particularly large for households with more disabled members and for individuals with more severe disabilities, as well as for lone parents and those on low incomes.

For some family types, these losses represent an extremely large percentage of income. For example, for households with at least one disabled adult and a disabled child, average annual cash losses will be just over £6,500—over 13% of average net income. Here is a specific figure, because I have some people from Bangladesh in my constituency; the impact of changes to direct taxes and benefits is to reduce the income of Bangladeshi households by some £4,400 per year on average. These are specific points, and I want to say them in a very constructive way to the Under-Secretary, because I know he responds. I am happy to say these things, because I know he will come back, as he always does.

At an individual level, women will lose on average considerably more from changes to direct taxes and benefits than men. Women will lose some £400 per year on average, and men will lose some £30.

Stephen Lloyd: The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful point. The figures he is talking about are true in my constituency as well. I know one family that is losing just under £500 a month. As we in the Chamber all know, the reality is that these are substantial sums of money for some of our poorest disabled fellow citizens. There is no point arguing about it any more. That is why I think the request from the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for an independent impact assessment is reasonable and fair, and it needs to be a matter of priority, otherwise there will be many more of the stories the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and yes, I totally agree. At the very end, I will make a similar recommendation to what the hon. Gentleman has mentioned.

This does affect low-income families. Some of the figures I have mentioned are for men and women, but the figures conceal very substantial variation within both genders. Lone parents in the bottom quintile—the bottom fifth—of the household income distribution lose some 25% of their net income, or £1 in every £4 on average. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) referred to this earlier, and mentioned very clearly the income impact on those in the lower income brackets.

On average, disabled lone parents with at least one disabled child fare even worse, losing almost £3 out of every £10 of their net income. In cash terms, their average losses are almost £10,000 per year. That is massive, and we cannot ignore those things. Those things really quite annoy me, and I think they annoy us all. In fairness, I think they probably annoy Ministers as well, but we do need a response from Ministers if we are to deal with them.

Around 1.5 million more children are forecast to be living in households below the relative poverty line. These are massive issues; in Northern Ireland, and in my constituency, children are sliding into poverty as a result of these reforms. I am being completely honest, Madam Deputy Speaker: these things are happening, in my constituency! And they are happening in everybody else’s as well.

We quite recently had the roll-out of universal credit, so we know these things come in almost like a storm breaking over people. The statistics carry on, but this gives a very clear picture to me. We were told that universal credit would be beneficial to households in need. I have to say honestly, I do not see that happening at this moment. To see disabled homeless people being so massively affected is totally unacceptable. For that reason, I support the recommendations of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. It recommends that the UK Government should:

1. Monitor and publish the impact of welfare reforms on disabled people, including assessment of the cumulative impact of tax and social security changes.

I think that if we get those facts, they will tell the tale.

2. Review the levels of benefits to ensure they provide an adequate standard of living.

It is so important. People are falling into poverty, and children in particular. I always get annoyed when I hear of children living below poverty levels; I think others might as well.

3. Ensure that work coaches are trained to deliver tailored employment support so that the specific needs of disabled people are being met.

How important that is.
Justin Tomlinson indicated assent.

Jim Shannon: I think the Minister is nodding his head, and I think he accepts that, but we need to have people that can do that for them. We deal with them every day of the week in my office, and in every other hon. Member’s office. I am not different from anybody else—we are all the same.

The EHRC also recommends that the Government should:

“4. Make the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities...part of UK law”

that is what the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) referred to in his intervention—

“so individuals can effectively challenge rights violations in the domestic legal system, and develop a clear and coordinated plan for how the UK and devolved Administrations

“will systematically address the UN’s recommendations on disability rights.”

I have been contacted in the last two days by some constituents. The hon. Member for High Peak referred to a quotation from some of her constituents. My constituents have asked me to highlight the fact that universal credit simply isn’t working. Those are real-life responses from real people with real problems. They have asked me to make contact with the Department, especially with Ministers, to ensure that their voices were heard in the midst of everything that has happened in this House today. We all know about it—I get a sore head just thinking about it. I assured my constituents that I would ensure that I voiced their concerns today, in the presence of the responding Minister. The concerns are as follows.

The Government say that no one falls through the cracks and ends up losing their benefit, because they will make sure that everyone claiming benefits under the old system is moved automatically on to universal credit and not forced to make a new claim. The Government say that no one is left without the money they need to survive, because they are continuing to pay people all of their old benefits until their new ones have kicked in.

The Government say that everyone is protected from becoming worse off under the new system, especially vulnerable groups. I say that is a very honourable assumption to make. I do not for one second say that that is the purpose of what the Government have put forward, but currently the Department is failing people.

I know of many people who went to the jobcentre and went through the online process with a member of staff and then came into my office. The benefits office—what we would have called the bru office many years ago—is just around the corner from my office, so most people come to me when they have a problem, to talk to my staff members. Although they went through the online process with a member of staff, they then came to my office, in tears, as they simply could not understand what was happening to them. They could not understand that they had not got their benefits. They could not understand the paperwork system. I do not want to be too critical, but I have to say these things, as that is what has happened.

People are sick with worry, not understanding what is happening or what is required of them. They are very worried about their benefit, and when we think that many of those who are on universal credit are ill, and that the stress of this makes things worse, it is clear that we are failing. We are failing the most vulnerable, and much as I would love to help every person on universal credit, my staff are doing nothing else but that.

I observe, by the way, in the news that staff in one of the jobs and benefits offices were enjoying a celebratory cake for doing an excellent job and seeing the end of the roll-out in Northern Ireland. There was not much of a celebration in Newtownards about it, and that is a fact. Nor was there a celebration anywhere else. That is not saying that they should not have enjoyed the cake; I am just saying, celebrate when it is good but do not celebrate when it is not. Too many people are anxious and concerned. I would ask the Minister to assure me, and others in the House, that changes are on the way for the most vulnerable in the practicality of the roll-out, and changes in how it is affecting all of those I listed earlier.

I understand that we need all those who are able to work to do just that. That is very constructive and helpful, but let us be honest: are people on benefits and sickness benefits because they want to be? No, they are not. They want to work the same as the rest of them. It is perfectly plausible to put that forward. But I also understand that forcing those who are not able to work to worry and make themselves ill is cruel and unnatural. It must not happen. We need changes, yes. We also need assurances and action. I look to the Minister and the Department as to how and when that will happen.

8.55 pm

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Madam Deputy Speaker, I appreciate your fortitude, and that of the previous occupant of the Chair, at this time of the evening. It has been a long week. I thank the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) for bringing forward this important debate and the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Welfare reform has had a huge impact on my constituents, in particular on the lives of disabled people. That is the case not just in my constituency, but across the UK. Regardless of the rhetoric of those on the Government Benches that welfare reforms are helping people back into work, the reality is that the conditions are getting harder for those who are most in need of assistance.

Despite the War on Welfare petition with over 100,000 signatures calling on the Government to introduce cumulative impact assessments, the Government have been unrelenting in introducing these changes. For many, they have earned a reputation for having a hostile environment when it comes to these welfare changes, coupled with the Government’s austerity measures, notwithstanding the impact of Brexit and the potential for a further weakened economy. The reality is that it will be the most vulnerable and the disabled who will be hardest hit by Brexit. Whether it is Brexit, the initial 2012 changes or the 2016 welfare reforms, we have to acknowledge that they are not working as well as they could be in practice. That is not a political statement; it is a matter of fact that they are not working as well as they could be. Unlike some Ministers, I know that the Minister of State for Disabled People cares deeply and she will want to get this right.
We have heard many contributions from across the House from right hon. and hon. Members, who have conducted themselves, may I say, immeasurably better in the Chamber than in recent weeks. They have served their constituents admirably better on this important matter. It is worth highlighting some of those valuable contributions. The hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth rightly highlighted the WOW campaign and the disproportionate impact on disabled people, families and carers. This is not a political statement, but something we all, across the House, want to get right. I know the Minister shares the same passion to get it right.

The hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) and for Clacton (Giles Watling), I am sorry to say, gave a rather rosy depiction. I am afraid I do not share the same optimistic view. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) for being a bit more realistic about the experience of his constituents. The fact is that there are elements of this that can be reviewed and reformed, and we all want to do that.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) highlighted the range of cuts. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) spoke passionately, as always, about the impact on WASPI women, who are working longer and harder under the pension changes. The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd) rightly highlighted that many disabled constituents want to work but cannot. That reminded me of the phrase that a good friend, Susan Douglas-Scott, said to me: often, it is society that disables individuals, not the individuals themselves. The hon. Members for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) and for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) highlighted the UN report and the EHRC report, and the joint calls for cumulative impact assessments. Of course, no debate would be complete without the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who needs no further words.

My constituent Liam from Hamilton has been trying to get the limited capability for work element for his universal credit, but so far he has been unsuccessful in his work capability assessment. His doctor, however, is adamant that Liam should not be working. Liam was a heavy goods courier. After a work-related injury, he cannot stand for any length of time and he cannot walk heavy goods courier. After a work-related injury, he cannot stand for any length of time and he cannot walk.

My constituent Liam from Hamilton has been trying to get the limited capability for work element for his universal credit, but so far he has been unsuccessful in his work capability assessment. His doctor, however, is adamant that Liam should not be working. Liam was a heavy goods courier. After a work-related injury, he cannot stand for any length of time and he cannot walk.

For many of those claiming PIP and employment support, the situation is not much better. The assessment criteria for these benefits do not appear to have been written by disabled people with disabled people in mind; rather they are tick-box exercises carried out by ill-trained staff. It is abundantly clear from many of the cases that have come through that my office and the assessors do not pick up on all the issues faced by disabled constituents. Yet I am asked daily to advocate on their behalf, when I do not even know the half of their situation or the magnitude of their disability. How can a work capability assessment or adviser assess that in less than five minutes, 20 minutes or half an hour? It is not possible. We have to be realistic.

On Friday, I visited a local charity in my constituency, Esteem, which I sponsored this year for my annual Christmas card competition and which supports people with mental ill health. It highlighted the experience of many of the clients it sees on a day-to-day basis who have gone through the jobcentre and faced horrible experiences. I know that that is not everyone’s experience, or the intention of any staff member in the local jobcentre, but Esteem has identified that employees and staff do not feel adequately trained or qualified to assess individuals and are bending over backwards to prevent people from receiving further cuts. They are doing everything they can. It is not the fault of staff that the policy is flawed, and I do not blame them for administering the policy set by the Government.

This flawed assessment process is resulting in inaccuracies being reported to the DWP and leading to far lower amounts of benefit being given than what is needed to fit people’s circumstances and to give them the right level of support. In some instances, DWP staff are advising people not to switch because it would be less beneficial for them. There might be issues with the legacy system, but clearly there are also issues with this system, if DWP staff are having to give that kind of advice to get people through the process. We have to acknowledge the flaws.

Having to fight to overturn a case causes huge stress to claimants as well as putting extra pressure on agencies, citizens advice bureaux and MPs’ offices. It is admirable that, as we have heard, Members across the House have gone out of their way to help individuals to fill in forms, go through mandatory reconsiderations and get the right support, but, ultimately, if the system worked as it should, we would not have to do that; we should not have to do that. It is not a good use of our office resources, staff or processes.

We have to get to the root cause. This situation demonstrates how unfit for purpose the current system is. Another of my constituents, Darin, suffers from a chronic condition as well as mental health issues, but he lost his entitlement to an enhanced rate of PIP and mobility element in a recent reassessment. The assessor clearly did not consider the full range of his needs.

Having to fight to overturn a case causes huge stress to claimants as well as putting extra pressure on agencies, citizens advice bureaux and MPs’ offices. It is admirable that, as we have heard, Members across the House have gone out of their way to help individuals to fill in forms, go through mandatory reconsiderations and get the right support, but, ultimately, if the system worked as it should, we would not have to do that; we should not have to do that. It is not a good use of our office resources, staff or processes.
For example, he is deemed personally able to manage his own treatments, but in reality he relies on his mother to take care of his medication and to wake him up every morning to make sure he gets the appropriate medication and support. He cannot do that on his own, yet his mother’s caring role was completely disregarded. It was Darin’s mother who approached my office, which helped to get the case overturned under a mandatory reconsideration, but we should not have had to do that.

That anxiety and stress could have been avoided altogether had the assessment been accurate in the first place.

Another constituent approached my office after losing the Motability element of his PIP reassessment. He had an adapted car, which was necessary for him to get to appointments and to maintain his independence. However, the assessor who carried out the review found that he did not require help with mobility, despite having lost one of his legs. He also lost all his entitlement to PIP during that reassessment. Again, he dealt with the matter through my office, and had to undergo the process of mandatory reconsideration—not to mention the impact on his family of the shock, the stress and the senseless removal of support. The fact was that he simply had no alternatives.

The system can be senseless and excessively technocratic, although that is not always the case. It takes no account of how the removal of financial support or help in the form of, for instance, a mobility car will affect disabled people, making their lives far more difficult.

In a similar case, my constituent Margaret, from Carluke, lost her Motability car during her transition from DLA to PIP, which left her housebound. She successfully disputed the distance that she could walk, reducing it from the 20 to 50 metres in the assessment report to 1 to 20 metres. Her Motability car was returned but, in the meantime, unfortunately, she had bought another. That meant that, although she was receiving the correct level of support, her living standards had been needlessly reduced by the reassessment process.

If the system works as well as we have heard it does in so many accounts, why does every single one of our offices, each and every day, have to help people to counter it? The fact is that it simply is not working as it should. I think it not unreasonable to suggest to the Minister that the motion offers the Government an opportunity to conduct a thorough review of the assessment criteria, with the meaningful involvement of disabled people and those with long-term conditions, to ensure that the criteria are fair and truly reflect the extra costs that people face and the myriad conditions that affect them. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire rightly admitted that a continual review and assessment were required.

Let me end by asking the Minister a simple question. If the Government can spend limitless amounts on Brexit and on planning for no deal, why can they not introduce an independent cumulative impact assessment of their welfare reforms?

9.7 pm

Marsha de Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for initiating a similar debate four years ago and pay tribute to his hard work in championing the rights of disabled people. I thank the War on Welfare campaigners for their work over the past six years in making the voices of disabled people heard in the House, along with other disabled people’s organisations and campaigners. More than 100,000 people signed the WOW petition which first brought the debate to the House.

Today, we have heard accounts from Members on both sides of the House. Let me mention just a few. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) described the devastating impact of social security cuts and, in particular, the impact of cuts in the Motability scheme. Many disabled people have lost that vital support. She also spoke of the impact of the movement of many recipients of disability living allowance to the personal independence payment. My hon. Friend the Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) shared personal and powerful testimonies from his constituents, but also highlighted the shocking statistics relating to the number of decisions on both employment and support allowance and PIP that were overturned in tribunals.

We are not asking the Government to reveal the truth about the effects of cuts on disabled people; we are asking them to own up to creating a social security system for disabled people that the UN report on extreme poverty described as “callous”, “punitive” and “mean-spirited”; a system that the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities has labelled as responsible for “grave” and “systemic” human rights violations; and a system that the Council of Europe concluded does not conform with the European social charter’s guarantee of the right to social security.

We are demanding that the Government own up to the effects of over £40 billion of cuts to disabled people’s social security since 2010, to imposing a sanctions regime on sick and disabled ESA claimants, to a cruel and callous assessment framework for both PIP and ESA and to the human catastrophe that is UC.

In the past eight years, disabled people have been forced to bear the brunt of the Tory austerity programme. They have been consistently and disproportionately impacted by cuts to social care, legal aid, housing, education and social security, as well as cuts to the independent living fund. The Centre for Welfare Reform has found that disabled people have been hit nine times harder by austerity than the rest of the population. Disabled people have been punished by this Government’s austerity agenda. They have been punished by the abolition of the DLA and the introduction of PIP in April 2013, and we know the policy intention for abolishing DLA was to reduce expenditure on disability benefits by 20%, a move that has left hundreds of thousands without the support they need. Those people include a constituent of mine who suffers from chronic kidney disease and has been HIV-positive for 30 years and who was given zero points on his PIP assessment, despite being unable to undress or prepare food by himself and despite being in receipt of DLA for 20 years.

Disabled people have been punished by the gutting of ESA, by introducing the 12-month time-limited payments for those on the contributions-based element, by the tightening of the ESA criteria and by the devastating cut to the ESA work-related activity component, worth £30 per week, introduced in 2017, which has hit over...
Marsha De Cordova
50,000 people this year. And disabled people have been punished by an inaccurate and callous assessment framework that denies them dignity and respect—an assessment framework that has forced over a quarter of a million disabled people to take the DWP to tribunal to get the social security that they are entitled to and under which 72% of PIP decisions brought to appeal are overturned.

Since 2010, disabled people have been punished by a “pointlessly cruel” sanctions regime, which has hit more than 1 million disabled people in the past eight years and which the Welfare Reform Act 2012 ensured was more severe, more punitive and more long-lasting than ever before, resulting in disabled people facing severe debt, skipping meals and taking out loans because they missed appointments at the jobcentre or did not fill out enough job applications. Figures released by the DWP last month show that 10% of ESA sanctions last longer than 26 weeks, so sick and disabled people are losing six months’-worth of their income.

Most importantly, disabled people face the Government’s flagship UC system, which acts as little more than a vehicle for cuts. Today’s Work and Pensions Committee report has confirmed the devastating truth of the impact of UC on disabled people and of the structural problems inherent to UC such as the five-week wait and an online claims system that is inaccessible to many people. Under UC, just one in three disabled people receive their payments on time and in full, with the rest having to wait weeks on end before receiving payment. Severely disabled people moving on to UC are losing vital social security support that they need in the form of disability premiums, including the severe disability premium that they would have had under legacy social security worth £64.40 a week—payments that severely disabled people relied on to cover extra costs for ready meals and help with household tasks.

For one severely disabled person, UC meant that they received no money for six weeks, on top of losing their SDP. The delays in payment and losing the premium meant that they were forced to get help from the council, which gave them food vouchers so that they had something to eat. In their own words, they felt “embarrassed and degraded” by a system that left them destitute. It took a year for their UC payments to be sorted out, with endless calls that “were too physically and mentally painful to make.”

The Government made a grave error in cutting disability premiums for those who are most in need. The transitional protections that this Government were forced to give as a result of a High Court ruling earlier this year do not apply to new applicants or to those who naturally migrated to universal credit, whose conditions remain the same but who will lose that vital support. So I ask the Minister today to commit to ensuring that no severely disabled person who moves on to universal credit will lose their premiums.

In the words of one WOW petition campaigner, in the past eight years this Government have created “a hostile environment for sick and disabled people” that “has turned life into a living hell.” They have created a hostile environment in the form of a punitive social security system that is stacked against disabled people. It is a system that is littered with errors such as the underpayment of ESA to almost 200,000 claimants by this Government. Disabled people have had to rely on the High Court to right the terrible wrongs in the social security system. In the past year alone, the High Court found that the Government unlawfully discriminated against hundreds of thousands of PIP claimants and that they unlawfully discriminated against severely disabled people who lost disability premiums.

Conservative Members continue to bury their heads in the sand when it comes to the suffering that they have caused. Over the past months, we have heard Ministers, including the former Secretary of State, label cuts to disabled people as “fake news” and the issues surrounding universal credit as “teething problems”. They dismiss the findings of UN investigations as politically motivated, and they dismiss calls to conduct a cumulative impact assessment that would offer a definitive analysis of the human cost of eight years of austerity for disabled people. The UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Social Security Advisory Committee have joined the call for that assessment to be done. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has carried out an impact assessment, and its findings were stark. We know that an impact assessment can be done by the Treasury, and if not, the Institute for Fiscal Studies can carry out an independent assessment.

How many more disabled people have to suffer under this Government’s austerity programme? How many more reports will link the Government’s policies with mental distress and suicide, yet be ignored? The fact that the Government refuse the findings of the UN on the effects of austerity on disabled people is shameful, but the fact that they refuse to conduct an assessment of the human impact of their own policies is downright denial.

9.17 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I should like to add my voice to those congratulating the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) on securing such an important debate. It is to the great credit of the House that, after what have been an emotional, long and tiring few weeks here, Members from every country of Great Britain are here tonight to speak up so well and so passionately for their constituents. This is probably our last full debate before the Adjournment debate tomorrow, and it is right that we have focused on such an important issue as the disabled people in our country and the amazing contribution that they make.

Of course, we should rightly focus all our efforts on what more we can do for those who are vulnerable and need our support, and I am sure that all hon. Members will want to ensure that we are doing everything we can to live up to the ideals of the United Nations conventions, which we helped to design, and to those of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which a Conservative Prime Minister introduced in this House. There is also cross-party support for the Equality Act 2010, which underpins so much of what we are doing. These are important issues that should unite the House, and I am pleased to have heard a lot of constructive comments this evening.
I have very little time, and I will not be able to answer all the questions that have been raised, but I will write to hon. Members if I have not been able to address their concerns. I want to focus on the motion, as it is so important.

I want to reassure hon. Members that the Government do publish distributional analysis of the cumulative impact of Government decisions on household finances at every fiscal event. The last publication was in October, to accompany the autumn Budget, and assessed the tax, welfare and public spending changes announced from the 2016 autumn statement onwards that carry a direct and quantifiable impact on households. Her Majesty’s Treasury uses its intragovernmental tax and benefits microsimulation model to produce that analysis, and the underlying data comes from the Office for National Statistics annual living costs and food survey.

Her Majesty’s Treasury uses the LCF survey, because it is the primary source of data about what income people have, how they spend their money and what public services they have accessed. The survey is unique in capturing all that information. Only by assessing the impact of Government policy on each of these areas can an accurate and fully comprehensive assessment of the impact of all Government policies on welfare, taxes and spending on public services be made. Looking at only one aspect, such as changes to income from benefits, does not provide a complete picture and is misleading. For example, the Government have committed to increasing spending on the NHS by £20 billion, which will have a positive and direct impact on the lives of millions of disabled people. To look only at benefits would be really misleading.

The LCF survey came into existence in 2007, but a household food consumption and expenditure survey has been run by Government since the 1940s. The primary purpose of these surveys has always been to collect detailed expenditure data for a sample of people, which is then used to assess changes in people’s spending patterns in order to adjust the basket of goods used to estimate inflation. The survey does not collect information from the sample of individuals that would allow us to assess whether a person is disabled—it has never been able to do that. As with all Government surveys, taking part is voluntary and a difficult balance has to be struck between the amount of information we are asking respondents to provide, and therefore the time it takes to complete the survey, and the proportion of the sample who are willing to take part. The survey sample is designed to be representative of the population, and the more people who do not respond, the more the estimates from the survey potentially suffer in quality.

Therefore, the lack of information about disability means that the information does not exist for the Treasury to estimate the cumulative impact of all Government policies on disabled people. However, the Office for National Statistics is currently undertaking developments to its household surveys to integrate various surveys and to link various sources of administrative data held by the Government, which means it might be possible to have the required information on disability status in future. The ONS is consulting users, and I have instructed my officials to raise the issue of disability status in the living costs and food survey. I encourage stakeholders, and all Members who care about this as much as I do, to contact the ONS, which is independent, and raise the issue. If we had that information, and if the ONS proceeds in the way I have just described by linking datasets, it would be possible for us to undertake the sorts of assessments that people have articulated so well this evening.

However, although a cumulative impact assessment is not possible now, the DWP does undertake a wide range of other research and analysis to assess and monitor the impact of policies on disabled people. The DWP runs its own household survey—the family resources survey—which collects information from a sample of households, with detailed information on sources of income, the amount of income families receive and detailed information on the characteristics of the people in those households.

Stephen Timms rose—

Sarah Newton: I have said that I will not take interventions, in order to answer all the questions, but I will write to any Members I am unable to answer in the time available.

The family resources survey collects the information required to make an assessment of the disability status of people in a household. The information is then used to provide estimates of the amount of income that families with disabled people have. The DWP publishes estimates of the numbers and percentages of people within households with disabled people who have low incomes in the annual “Households below average income” publication.

In the 2016-17 survey, we saw that 16% of people in families with a disabled person were described as in absolute low-income poverty before housing costs, with a weekly income after tax of £280 or less for a couple with no children, compared with 19% in 2009-10. Absolute low-income poverty, on a before housing costs basis, has actually improved by three percentage points since 2010 for families with a disabled person.

Looking at all four measures of low-income poverty—before and after housing costs, and on a relative and on an absolute basis—poverty for people in families with a disabled person has improved since 2010 on three of the four measures, and there was no change in the fourth. I am not complacent. One person living in poverty in this country is one person too many, which is why we are determined to do everything we can to put more money in people’s pockets.1

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Newton: Let me make these points. I have been asked to address a lot of issues, and I really want to do that.

As well as the poverty figures, the Department for Work and Pensions publishes impact assessments for every new policy that carefully consider the potential impact of those policies on people with protected characteristics, in line with its legal obligations and its strong commitment to promoting fairness. The DWP has a continual and broad programme of research and evaluation of policies affecting disabled people, which is often contracted to independent research bodies, and all the findings are published. A recent example of such work is the research into the experience of PIP claimants, which was published in September and provided valuable insight into how PIP is working to inform policy development.

1.[Official Report, 5 February 2019, Vol. 654, c. 2MC.]
We have had some appalling misuse of statistics tonight. Of all the people who have applied for PIP, 9% have gone to appeal and 4% have been overturned. I work with a great number of colleagues in this House, with the Select Committees, with the all-party parliamentary groups, with disabled people and with those who represent disabled people. When we hear recommendations on how we can improve the process, we implement them. The Work and Pensions Committee did an extremely valuable piece of work on assessments for ESA and PIP, and we are delivering on implementing those recommendations.

The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George), who is a member of the Work and Pensions Committee, spoke about the video recording of PIP assessments. I am determined to see that happen, because it will restore a lot of confidence in the process. We spent the summer carefully speaking to people with disabilities and to those who undertake the assessments—let us not forget that they are fully qualified healthcare professionals—about video recording. Putting all that information together, we started live testing the video recording of PIP assessments only a few weeks ago. That work will be completed in the new year, and we will be able to report back to the Select Committee and to the House on our progress and on how we will roll it out.

We are also undertaking a huge, large-scale test—it is actually the largest randomised control trial of its kind in the western world—as well as research into the employment and support package, to look at all the things that work to enable people with disabilities who want to work to get into work. It was interesting to listen to the personal experiences of the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Stephen Lloyd), and there are many disabled people who want to work but face unacceptable barriers to work, although we have made a lot of progress.

The latest data from the ONS shows that 900,000 more people are in work over the last five years, which is a steady increase in the employment rate from 43% to 51%, but we are very ambitious and want to see that gap close completely so that employers can draw on all the talents of the nation. We have set ourselves the goal of having 1 million more disabled people in work, on which I completely agree. Employment is really important. All of us will be going back to our constituencies. We will do some Christmas shopping, go to carol services and enjoy a panto—we will be doing things with our families—but so many disabled people in our country will not be able to do that. We are absolutely determined through what we do with our sector champions and on our inter-ministerial working groups to make sure that every disabled person in our society can play their full part. We are removing those barriers. We are absolutely committed to living up to all the UN standards that we have signed up to, which are certain to make positive differences and changes.

Not only are we helping those people who can work into work, but we are always looking at what more we can do to improve our main health and disability-related benefits. Let us be absolutely clear that we are spending record sums on those benefits—over £50 billion this year, which is much larger than our defence budget. The figure has grown by more than £5.4 billion since 2010, and it is forecast to rise in every single year of this Parliament. All those benefits that are about the additional costs of disability were not frozen and were not part of the benefits cap, and include payments for carers, so it is simply not true to say, as Members have this evening, that we have been reducing the amount of money that we spend on the social security system.

Stephen Timms: Professor Alston produced a punchy report, and it made some telling points. He referred to "the dramatic decline in the fortunes of the least well off in this country."

He added: "The Government has remained determinedly in a state of denial."

From what the Minister is saying, it seems she is confirming Professor Alston’s point. There has, has there not, been a dramatic decline in the fortunes of the least well-off?

Sarah Newton: I was very pleased when the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth opened this debate by saying that she is an evidence-based policymaker, because I am too. I spent time serving on the Science and Technology Committee, where I was instrumental in having social science brought into its purview, and I was on the board of the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. It is very important to me to make sure we use statistics, data and research accurately, and I am quoting from independent, impartial information.

As I said, one person in poverty is one too many, but let us not forget that we have had to deal with the legacy we were left by the previous Government of “There is no money”. We have had to make difficult choices about public expenditure, but we made sure that we increased the amount of money for people with disabilities and we increased money for the NHS. That extra money going into the NHS is directly benefiting people with health conditions and disability.

I have little time to wind up, but I want to mention that we have talked about other barriers that people face to fulfilling their aspiration to play a full part in our society, on which I completely agree. Employment is really important. All of us will be going back to our constituencies. We will do some Christmas shopping, go to carol services and enjoy a panto—we will be doing things with our families—but so many disabled people in our country will not be able to do that. We are absolutely determined through what we do with our sector champions and on our inter-ministerial working groups to make sure that every disabled person in our society can play their full part. We are removing those barriers. We are absolutely committed to living up to all the UN standards that we have signed up to, which are certain to make positive differences and changes.

9.32 pm

Debbie Abrahams: Again, let me thank the Backbench Business Committee and all contributors to the debate, who have been fantastic, highlighting what is happening in their constituencies up and down the country. I also wish to thank the thousands of people who have been in contact with me over the past months and days. I thank the disability people’s organisations—WOW, Disabled People Against Cuts, Disability Inclusion and the many charities that have provided their briefings, including the Centre for Welfare Reform, which said that such a cumulative impact assessment would be possible. Given that the Treasury accepts the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s cumulative impact assessment modelling, it seems bizarre that the Minister is saying that it cannot happen. I am conscious that if I do not finish before 9.36 pm, we cannot have a vote on this motion. So, once again, I ask us all to remember the stories we have discussed this evening as we leave to go on our Christmas breaks.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House calls on the Government to commission an independent assessment of the cumulative impact of changes to the social security system on sick and disabled people and their families and carers.

**Business without Debate**

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

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

**HUMAN FERTILISATION AND EMBRYOLOGY**

That the draft Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008 (Remedial) Order 2018, which was laid before this House on 19 July, be approved. — (Craig Whittaker)

*Question agreed to*

That the draft Human Fertilisation and Embryology (Parental Orders) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 15 November, be approved. — (Craig Whittaker.)

*Question agreed to.*

**Rail Fares: Cheltenham and London**

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

9.34 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I have called this debate on rail fares between Cheltenham and London because when it comes to rail travel, my constituents are not being treated fairly. Local people, simply because they live where I and my constituents do, are being charged more per mile for their train travel to London than others who live a similar distance from the capital. It is an injustice that stretches back decades and it needs to be put right.

Cheltenham is around 90 miles or so from London. Because Dr Beeching, in his wisdom, pulled up the more direct line through Andoversford, the train line itself is a little lengthier because it travels a more circuitous route, but the central point remains: it is not terribly far from London at all. It is a substantial town, with more than 110,000 people. It is larger than Basingstoke, Chelmsford, Maidstone and Worcester. It is the home of GCHQ and GE Aviation—certainly if we include Bishops Cleeve. It is the home of Spirax-Sarco and Superdry. It hosts the world famous Cheltenham jump racing festival, the renowned literature, jazz, and science festivals, and much more besides. When it comes to train use, Cheltenham is by far the busiest station in Gloucestershire. Data from the Office of Rail Regulation shows that 2.35 million passengers used the station in 2016-17—almost as many as all the other stations on the route combined, and twice as many as 10 years ago.

Despite all that, there is a glaring discrepancy when it comes to the price of tickets, and season tickets in particular. Take, for example, Kingham to London, which is admittedly a shorter distance, but not much shorter. The season ticket price is £7,124. What about Bath Spa to London, which is further than Cheltenham to London? The season ticket price is £8,064. A season ticket for Bristol Temple Meads to London is £8,244, and a season ticket for Worcester to London is £8,400, yet a season ticket for Cheltenham to London Paddington is £10,344. To make the point absolutely clear: were someone to go way further than Cheltenham, down to Exeter, which is a similarly sized town, the distance from London is 202 miles, which is approximately double the distance to Cheltenham. The season ticket for Exeter to London is £9,788. In other words, it is around £500 cheaper than the Cheltenham season ticket. How can that possibly be fair?

What rubs salt into the wounds is that the service is not as good as it should be. First, there is a systemic problem: it is too slow overall. I see the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) nodding his head in agreement. Let me put that into some kind of perspective: the journey from Bristol to London takes around an hour and 43 minutes, and from Exeter, which as I said is around double the distance, it takes two hours and two minutes to get to London, yet the shortest journey from Cheltenham takes longer still than that. On average, it takes two hours and 16 minutes.

The first problem, then, is that it is too slow, which is galling because there was a time when Cheltenham had the fastest train service anywhere in the country—the
Cheltenham Flyer was the fastest train in the land. The second problem is that there are too many delays and cancellations. On Saturday 4 August, five services were cancelled because a train manager was not available.

What is the impact of all this? Put bluntly, the impact in my constituency is modal shift, which is a technical way of saying that people get in their cars. So many of my constituents drive to Kemble, Kingham, Swindon, Oxford, or even all the way to London. My constituents express frustration at the fact that they are forced to do so and at the fact that that has an unhelpful impact on the environment and air quality. Other concerns are expressed about businesses being restricted from developing and expanding in the way that they otherwise might have done. I posted on social media about this issue, and businesses in Eagle Tower in the centre of Cheltenham said that they are unable to recruit in the way that they might otherwise do or to expand their businesses.

This issue is also important because Cheltenham has plans for a cyber-park, which I have been passionate about since 2014 and which has made really crucial steps forward in recent months. The Department for Transport has committed £22 million in transport infrastructure improvements. The Department for International Trade is promoting the park at international conferences and so on. The park will succeed, but its ability to do so will be immeasurably enhanced if we can make really crucial transport improvements.

The Department for Transport has committed £22 million in transport infrastructure improvements. The Department for International Trade is promoting the park at international conferences and so on. The park will succeed, but its ability to do so will be immeasurably enhanced if we can make really crucial transport improvements.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Considering that we are talking about the Stroud Valleys line, which goes to Cheltenham, I have a vested interest in this matter. On fares, when I had to travel to Gloucester last week, I found to my shock that it cost an extra £10 either way. That may well be what happens from where I live in Stonehouse, and yet that is exactly the same cost of just getting a train from Stonehouse to London. In other words, the company is charging a person the same when they are on the train as they would do if they were getting on the train for the shorter journey. That cannot be right or fair. Effectively, it is charging the punter more than it should. Does he agree?

Alex Chalk: I do agree, yes. There are two aspects to the pricing perversity that that helpful intervention discloses. First, the line itself is more expensive than similar lines. Secondly, there can be perversities within the line itself, which is an inequity for local people. In the interests of balance, it is important to note that there are some really important and good things taking place. Nationally, I commend the fact that the Government are continuing with an ambitious programme of investment. That is £48 billion over the next five years. The DfT is in the process of moving from Delay Repay 30 to Delay Repay 15, which is more justice for consumers. In Gloucestershire, the redoubling of the Kemble to Swindon line is a hugely positive infrastructure improvement. There are impending timetable changes and new faster trains, so we will be getting a direct hourly sub-two hour service to London in 2019. That is all great. It is also great that Cheltenham is getting an additional 70 surface car parking spaces, taking capacity to at least 320 spaces. That is investment worth £700,000 going into Cheltenham, so that is also good news, and there is further investment to come. I am not standing here and saying that, somehow, we should turn the clock back. I do not believe in renationalisation. I am just about old enough to remember British Rail, and it was absolutely terrible. The fact is that, since privatisation, a huge amount of money has been invested in our railways and passenger numbers have soared.

It is not enough to say that renationalisation would be a terrible backward step. It is not enough to say that it would cost the taxpayer, not save them money. It is true that it would reduce investment, not increase it, and innovation would be stifled, not encouraged and so on. However, simply rejecting renationalisation is not enough. The market needs to be forced to act fairly. Private companies have a responsibility to the public, and a particular responsibility where the public is a captive market, and cannot take their custom elsewhere, as is the case on the railways. The provider must operate within a framework that ensures that that monopoly position is not abused and customers are treated fairly. It is fair to say that, in these circumstances, it is not acting as it should. In a debate on 15 October—so, not very long ago—the then rail Minister referred to “historical anomalies”. He also stated: “No one could defend the current fares system”.—[Official Report, 15 October 2018; Vol. 647, c. 476.]

He was absolutely right, and I really welcomed that frank admission. One issue is that monopoly power on certain lines distorts pricing. For example, if we look at Grantham, which is also around 100 miles from London, we see that there are three franchises competing to provide a service. A season ticket from Grantham is around £3,000 a year less. Equally, if we look at Crewe, where there are two operators, it is only £500 a year more, despite being 170 miles from London, so a considerable distance further. The issue of whether there is a single operator or more providers can make a big difference as well.

This issue must be fixed. I am aware that the Government have commissioned the Rail Delivery Group’s “Easier Fares” consultation, and are considering that. I am also aware that, on 11 October, the Secretary of State launched a “root and branch review of the rail industry”. In his words, he said: “It is vital that this review leaves no stone unturned and makes bold recommendations for the future.” I warmly welcome that, but one of those stones needs to be marked “Cheltenham”. We are not asking for special treatment, but we are asking for fair treatment. For the sake of my constituents and the future of the town I represent, that cannot come soon enough.

9.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He is a great champion for Cheltenham, and all things in and around it, as we have just heard. He is most certainly a great campaigner on rail issues for Cheltenham, as I have found very early in my time in this role, and as my predecessors are all too aware.

My hon. Friend made reference to the fact that passenger numbers in Cheltenham have grown recently. Indeed, in the last 20 years and a bit more, passenger numbers have doubled on our rail network; it is a fantastic thing. The Government and franchise train operators have made significant investment in services
and the network to cope with the challenge of this significant increase in use. It is also fair to say that there are many issues to resolve, one of which is fares and value for money. I recognise the concerns expressed by my hon. Friend regarding the fares between Cheltenham and London, as well as those raised by passengers around the whole wider issue of rail fares.

I should just explain where we are on this matter and put the issue into context. Fare revenue is vital in the day-to-day running of our railway operations and the massive upgrade programme to which my hon. Friend referred and which is taking place all around the country. Of course, that is all focused on benefitting passengers. We know that any increase in rail fares may affect the budgets of working people and their families, and we want passengers to know that they are getting value for money. As a Government, we want to help people to keep more of their own money, which is why we have increased the personal allowance and frozen fuel duty and so on. In the world of rail, that means that, since 2014, the Government have ensured that increases to regulated rail fares have been restricted to inflation only. Indeed, 2019 will be the sixth year running in which fare increases have been capped in this way.

I am aware that it might sometimes seem that the fares offered for sale on our railways are always expensive, but there are many very cheap fares offered for travel, especially if people are able to book in advance. For example, it is possible to purchase an advance standard single fare from Cheltenham Spa to London from as little as £14.50. We want to continue to ensure that passengers feel the benefits of fare availability that suits them, and we want them to have access to affordable fares. That is why we are exploring how to link fare increases to the more commonly used consumer prices index measure of inflation in the future. At the moment, it is linked with the retail prices index. To be sustainable, income and costs to the rail industry have to change in parallel. Linking fare increases to the CPI without parallel changes in the cost base would simply mean higher costs to taxpayers year on year. The Secretary of State would like to work together with the rail industry, the Office of Rail and Road, the regulator, the unions and the Rail Delivery Group to ensure that the CPI, not the RPI, is used as the basis for industry staff cost deals in the future.

Alex Chalk: I am very grateful to the Minister for his helpful response. Does he agree that the review also needs to consider structural discrepancies? Although I take the point about restricting the rate of increase, if in fact that does not address the underlying structural discrepancy, the perversity and unfairness remain. Does he therefore agree that this needs to be looked at in the round?

Andrew Jones: Basically, yes I do; indeed, I am coming to that point.

What I am trying to get across is that, as an industry as a whole—with industry colleagues—we can keep the sector as efficient as possible, continue the income through the farebox and plough that back in to make our rail network even better, with investment in infrastructure and rolling stock.

As my hon. Friend highlighted, my predecessor did indeed acknowledge that the fare system is in need of thorough reform, and my priorities are no different at all. I am a regular rail user, of course, and I understand that there can be anomalies in the fare system that can feel unfair to passengers, and we must explore changes to remedy this situation. There can be perverse pricing on our network and we are going to tackle that.

The Williams rail review that was announced by the Government earlier this year will take a root-and-branch look at the system, including considering how the railway can offer good value fares for passengers while keeping costs down for taxpayers. The RDG and Transport Focus recently ran the Easier Fares consultation, which closed in September, where they asked passengers to give their thoughts on how fares could be improved. My Department is looking forward to seeing the results. I met the RDG yesterday and it told me that it would publish the results of its consultation early next year. Both the Williams review and the results of the Easier Fares consultation will support discussions on reforming the fares system to better deliver improvements for passengers. I want to see simpler, more easily understood fares. As my hon. Friend knows, we committed in our manifesto to review rail ticketing and to remove the complexity and perversity that we see in pricing. This is indeed the root-and-branch review that he mentioned.

Together we can help to improve the service that passengers receive on our trains. We are working closely with the industry to deliver a better offer to passengers who travel on fewer than five days per week. Work patterns are changing—we can recognise that and see it all around us—and rail ticketing has to become more flexible to allow part-time workers access to more cost-efficient fares. We will seek proposals from Great Western Railway, as part of its direct award, on how it might be possible to introduce more flexible products while of course ensuring that they are affordable and represent value for money for taxpayers too. This has not yet had quite as much publicity as it might. As well as working with industry to improve the quality of the rolling stock and the infrastructure, we want the industry to introduce initiatives that both benefit passengers and bring about growth in rail travel.

The RDG has announced the introduction of a 26 to 30-year-olds’ railcard that will reduce the cost of rail travel for young people by up to a third on certain tickets. This will be rolled out nationally from 2 January. We welcome this initiative—I am sure that everyone would—as we believe that it will improve opportunities for young people through making travel more affordable and increase social mobility. My hon. Friend mentioned his worry that the cost of rail travel can be discouraging for economic activity in terms of people visiting his constituency. I hope that the introduction of this railcard, as announced by the industry and the Chancellor, will help them and be welcomed by my hon. Friend and others.

Cheltenham Spa is a fantastic place; I know it very well, actually. It has regular services to and from Birmingham, Bristol and London, with services operated by Great Western Railway and CrossCountry. To support improvements to the amenities of the station itself, a masterplan for the station has been promoted, with the local authority playing a leading role. My hon. Friend mentioned increased car parking. Additional car parking is a key element within the planned package of improvements, with a new multi-storey car park planned.1 These improvements are strongly supported by Great

---

Western Railway. They also include easier pedestrian access, extra bicycle storage, and a more user-friendly bus interchange. The improvements will accommodate growing demand, particularly once the improved London services are introduced using brand new Intercity Express trains. There is a significant amount of investment to make changes to benefit his constituents.

One point that is raised repeatedly by colleagues is work that is taking place across the network to make it more accessible. We have a Victorian infrastructure, of course, and successive Governments have, over many years, run a programme called Access for All that is about making stations more accessible for people who may struggle with mobility. Everybody benefits from that, because it could just be about managing luggage, having an easier route, or travelling with little ones in pushchairs. Lots of people will benefit. We are continuing that work. There is a £300 million budget for the expansion of Access for All in control period 6, which starts next year.

Design work is currently taking place to create a new, accessible route to Cheltenham Spa station under that programme. Work to begin installing the new accessible route is planned to start next autumn and will include the installation of lifts to all platforms, to help passengers gain access to their platforms more easily. That is very positive news, and I hope it will be recognised and welcomed in Cheltenham.

My hon. Friend referenced the new rolling stock. GWR has supported the station improvements and introduced new Intercity Express trains on its network, supporting better services for passengers. It is replacing old British Rail-era trains. That seems a long time ago; my hon. Friend said he could just about remember it, but I remember it clearly. Those new bi-mode trains are a vast improvement. They are cleaner running, faster, more spacious, offer a significantly more pleasant experience and are more efficient to run. The new trains are already entering service, and each one delivers more capacity, with 76 more seats available for passengers. However, the work does not cease there. Once those trains are introduced, passengers will continue to see improved journey times and greater reliability. Maintaining operators’ ability to invest in our railways is a crucial part of the ongoing development of both the Cheltenham to London route and Cheltenham Spa station.

I thank my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for their contributions to the debate. We will continue to look at ways of both improving services and keeping the cost to passengers as low as possible, while maintaining value for money for taxpayers. The case for reform is strong—we have recognised that and agree with it. The question is how we take it forward.

While specific details of the Williams review are expected next year, many of the concerns shared by my hon. Friend and his constituents will be addressed by that review. The review has launched its call for evidence, which is an important step in its initial phase, and the review team hopes to hear from a wide range of stakeholders across the country. I encourage constituents to get in touch with the team and make any contributions that they feel are relevant. I will ensure that my hon. Friend’s speech is sent to Mr Williams for consideration.

Next year, we will see more improvements to the service that passengers from Cheltenham receive—new, faster trains with a greater capacity continuing to be introduced, improvements to Cheltenham Spa station and further development of the station’s accessibility under the Access for All programme.

We will also have a longer-term review of our rail industry, which has been such a success over the last 20 years. It has gone from nationalisation and decline to privatisation, with 1 billion more passenger journeys a year—a huge growth—but is it structured as well as it should be for the next phase of its life? That is the question that Mr Williams has to answer. It is a great opportunity to ask broader questions, including about the Department’s role in the industry. I will ensure that my hon. Friend’s points are considered and that the rail review includes fares, to make them simpler and nimbler and eliminate any perversity, so that we encourage more people on to our railways, including those from Cheltenham.

Question put and agreed to.

9.58 pm

House adjourned.
Deferred Divisions

EXTING THE EUROPEAN UNION
(FINANCIAL SERVICES)

That the draft Markets in Financial Instruments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 17 October, be approved.


Division No. 283]

AYS

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Sim
Aliyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Arger, Edward
Akins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Brereton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cardilage, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chihiisi, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hermon, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkins, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrew
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczmarski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, Sir Edward
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Ley, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidington, rh Mr David
Little Pengelly, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Madewan, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa

Maynard, Paul
McCullaghlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merrick, Johnny
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Ms Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryll
Murrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selsor, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Deferred Divisions

19 DECEMBER 2018

Deferred Divisions

Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Sym, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tholhurst, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vazey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Mr Charles
Walker, Mr Robin
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Watling, Giles
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Mrs Heather
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
Zahawi, Nadhim

Harris, Carolyn
Hayman, Sue
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hill, Mike
Hillier, Meg
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollem, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, rh Mr George
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Khan, Afzal
Kilien, Gæd
Laird, Lesley
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Lee, Karen
Leslie, Mr Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lloyd, Tony
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Ian C.
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Maihotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mearsns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Peacock, Stephanie
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodd, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruan, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiqi, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, rh Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thombery, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twig, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Ummunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Question accordingly agreed to.

EXTING THE EUROPEAN UNION (COMPANIES)

That the draft Accounts and Reports (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, which were laid before this House on 31 October, be approved.
The House divided: Ayes 305, Noes 216.

Division No. 284]

AYES

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella
Bretheron, Jack
Brighouse, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, Conor
Burton, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartwright, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverty, James
Coffey, Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabbe, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, Chris
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Donnies, Ms Nadine
Douglas, Steve
Dowden, Oliver
Drewe, Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, Mr Philip
Ellis, Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evenett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Fox, rh Dr Liam
Frasco, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Gale, Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
Ghani, Ms Nusrat
Gibbs, rh Nick
Gilian, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Goodwill, rh Mr Robert
Gove, rh Michael
Graham, Richard
Grant, Bill
Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
Green, Chris
Green, rh Damian
Greening, rh Justine
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Gyimah, rh Sam
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Hall, Luke
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, rh Sir John
Head, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton, rh Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Herbert, rh Nick
Hemson, Lady
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hollingbery, George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollobone, Mr Philip
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, Mr Alister
Janes, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Mr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kaczynski, Daniel
Keegan, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Knight, rh Sir Greg
Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lee, Dr Phillip
Lefroy, Jeremy
Legislative, Rh Sir David
Letwin, rh Sir Oliver
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grant, rh Ian
Liddingon, Mr David
Little Pellygol, Emma
Lopez, Julia
Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Mackinlay, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, Kit
Mann, Scott
Masterton, Paul
May, rh Mrs Theresa
Maynard, Paul
McLoughlin, rh Sir Patrick
McPartland, Stephen
McVey, rh Ms Esther
Menzies, Mark
Merriman, Huw
Metcalfe, Stephen
Miller, rh Mrs Maria
Milling, Amanda
Mills, Nigel
Milton, rh Anne
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Moore, Damien
Mordaunt, rh Penny
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morriss, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Morrison, Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O’Brien, Neil
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parish, Neil
Paton, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philip, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poulter, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh Dominic
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Gavin
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rudd, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, Alok
Simpson, David
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Symms, Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Question accordingly agreed to.

Phillipson, Bridget
Piddock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruane, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeech, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Tami, rh Mark
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, Valerie
Walker, Thelma
West, Catherine
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel
Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

The Secretary of State was asked—

EU Trade Agreements

1. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What estimate he has made of the number of trade agreements that the UK is party to as a result of its membership of the EU that would be rolled over on exit day in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal.

Dr Fox: We will inform Parliament and the public when agreements have been signed.

2. Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Which countries indicated a preference for the UK delaying negotiations with them in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal?

Dr Fox: None of them has said to us that they are unwilling to conclude new roll-over agreements with the UK.

3. Tom Brake: First, I wish you, Mr Speaker, other Members and staff a very merry Christmas.

Mr Speaker, I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his usual patriotic and optimistic tone. He is right that the country is in the middle of an export boom; our exports are at an all-time high. In the first six months of the year, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Kingdom was second only to China in inward investment. It is truly a very positive picture, and we will be able to build on that, whatever our relationship with the European Union.

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): On behalf of our Front Benchers, may I extend Christmas greetings, particularly to the Secretary of State and his team? Mr Speaker, in Prayers this morning, your chaplain referred to the perseverance of the wise men; I think we all need that.

What assessment has the Secretary of State made of potential trade partners being unwilling to conclude new roll-over agreements with the UK because of most favoured nation clauses in agreements that they have concluded with other countries, to which they are unwilling to give the same trade preferences as they do to the EU?

I am thinking of countries such as Singapore, which might be unwilling to give other Trans-Pacific Partnership countries the same access to their telecoms market that the EU has enjoyed.

Dr Fox: We discuss matters with other countries on a case-by-case basis. None of them has said to us that they do not want to continue to have an agreement with the United Kingdom; that is entirely understandable, as
we are the world’s fifth biggest economy. Where we are able to translate elements into a bilateral context, we are doing so. We are working through those agreements. We are making good progress, and I will report to the House as and when each of them is signed.

WTO: Food Security and Agriculture

2. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with members of the WTO on global (a) food security and (b) agricultural trade.

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I add my Christmas wishes to you, Mr Speaker.

Both issues have been covered recently in discussions with World Trade Organisation members. For example, agricultural global value chains were considered at the recent G20 trade and investment working group. As a supporter of the rules-based multilateral trading system, we believe that WTO members must continually look for ways of strengthening the system.

Kerry McCarthy: I understand that a number of important WTO member states have objected to the UK and EU splitting tariff rate quotas post Brexit. At the end of October, the Secretary of State announced that the UK would be entering into general agreement on tariffs and trade negotiations. Is that another illustration of the fact that we cannot unilaterally negotiate trading arrangements post Brexit with other countries, and that it requires agreement? It looks like it will be an incredibly lengthy and tortuous process that will not have quick results.

George Hollingbery: The hon. Lady will know that the vast majority of nations represented in the WTO accepted the deposit of our schedules. Some did not and we are entering article 28 negotiations with them, as is completely normal. We can trade on those schedules as deposited until then—the European Union has been trading on uncertified schedules since 1995, so it should not impede our trade. Yes, negotiations will continue to agree those tariff rate quotas.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): You have had a bit of a week, Mr Speaker—we all have. May I take this opportunity to wish you a very restful Christmas and a happy new year?

Does the Department for International Trade accept that what one needs for international trade is willing buyers and sellers? Has the Department made any estimate of how much lower food prices will be to British consumers if we leave the European Union without the withdrawal agreement?

George Hollingbery: The situation after a hard Brexit—a no-deal Brexit—is a complex one and will rely on a large number of factors. Some Government policies have yet to be absolutely finalised. The pricing of goods in the UK market, particularly for food, is regarded as extremely sensitive, as indeed are the incomes and livelihoods of farmers throughout the UK who rely on selling those products.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker.

The memo published by the European Commission yesterday was clear that, if the UK leaves with no deal and ends up trading on WTO terms, customs declarations and other checks will be required on exports into the EU. Have the Government estimated how much that will cost UK business?

George Hollingbery: The Prime Minister has brought back a deal from Brussels. I believe it is the right deal for this country. If it is put in place, what the hon. Gentleman describes will plainly not be an issue.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Happy Christmas to you from Taunton Deane, Mr Speaker. I thought I would get that in.

The EU is the largest trading partner for agriculture and food for this country and, under our relationship with the EU, agriculture has blossomed. Margins are very tight. Will the Minister give assurances that, in the worst-case scenario, agriculture will not suffer under WTO rules? In the best-case scenario, does he agree that accepting the deal is by far the best option for our farmers?

George Hollingbery: I apologise, Mr Speaker—I was not listening carefully to the question. I am told by my Front-Bench colleagues that the answer is yes and yes.

Mr Speaker: I think we appreciate the Minister’s candour. There was no dissembling there, and we thank him for that.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Merry Christmas to everybody.

Will the Minister confirm that any future trade agreements will not undermine current environmental and animal welfare standards?

George Hollingbery: On this occasion I was listening and have the question in my mind. I deeply apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow)—she is listed as having another question.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has repeatedly made it clear in the House that we will not lower our standards in pursuit of free trade agreements. To reassure the hon. Gentleman, apart from anything else it would be business madness to do so. A lot of our exporters rely on Britain’s reputation abroad for quality, and undermining it would simply not work. Further, large numbers of Labour Members did not vote for the comprehensive economic and trade agreement, which contained specific chapters—chapters 5, 23 and 24—that pursued exactly what he wants. Labour Front Benchers did not support it.

Free Trade Agreements

3. Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): What steps he is taking to consult on potential new free trade agreements.

The Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade (Dr Liam Fox): This year the Department for International Trade ran four public consultations on potential UK free trade agreement negotiations with the US, Australia and New Zealand,
and on potential accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership—otherwise known, snappily, as the CPTPP. The insights gained from our consultations will inform our overall approach and our stakeholder engagement plans during these potential free trade agreement negotiations.

**Kevin Foster:** I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer. The Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership represents one of the most exciting opportunities for the UK post Brexit. Can he confirm that he has consulted with the necessary stakeholders and partners to ensure that we can begin talks on our country’s accession the moment we leave the European Union?

**Dr Fox:** Ministers have been engaging with all 11 CPTPP members. I have recently spoken to a number of Ministers, including from Singapore, Mexico, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, and the positive response to our engagement has been demonstrated by the supportive comments from some of the leaders of those countries—including Prime Minister Abe of Japan and Prime Minister Morrison of Australia—all of whom are very keen, as Prime Minister Abe said, to welcome Britain with open arms as soon as possible.

**Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op):** But isn’t the problem for the Secretary of State that these potential new free trade agreements will not be conclusive until we know what the UK’s trade relationship with the EU is? Does he not now have to admit that it is not possible, realistically, to sign or conclude free trade agreements with all those other countries, because it will be several years—maybe two, three or more—before we conclude our trade arrangement with the EU?

**Dr Fox:** Of course, the best thing that any of us could do is ensure that we have an agreement as soon as possible with the European Union, which Members of this House will be able to contribute to. Of course, if the House decides that we are not to come to an agreement with the European Union, there will be adverse consequences.

**Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con):** It has been very difficult for the International Trade Committee to scrutinise progress in the roll-over of current trade agreements because of the sensitivity of the negotiations. Will my right hon. Friend look urgently into establishing a confidential Commons Committee that has access to restricted negotiating documents, to ensure proper scrutiny of any talks over new free trade agreements?

**Dr Fox:** My hon. Friend raises an important issue, which she has also raised in the Committee. The Government are looking at ways in which we can improve scrutiny without undermining the confidential nature of the discussions that we have. I will want to discuss the issues with the Opposition as well to see whether we can have a robust system that is also secure. That would be to the benefit of the whole House.

**Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op):** A merry Christmas from Feltham and Heston to you, Mr Speaker and to everybody else.

This week, I attended an interesting seminar by Global Policy Insights on trade with the Commonwealth pre and post Brexit. The Commonwealth accounts for 8.9% of UK exports a couple of years ago—roughly the same as UK exports to Germany. Could the Secretary of State update the House on what discussions his Department is having with Commonwealth nations on the potential of free trade agreements and on what success he is having?

**Dr Fox:** The hon. Lady raises an important point. Of course, we have a number of agreements already with a number of Commonwealth countries and groups of Commonwealth countries, and we are close to signing one, which we will announce to the House shortly. However, we are also concerned about the level of intra-Commonwealth trade and how we can use that very large population, often with common legal rules, to enhance it. At the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in London, we set out our plans for a trade audit tool to help improve it, and we have had very positive engagement on that. There is tremendous opportunity inside the Commonwealth to allow countries to trade their way out of poverty, and we intend to ensure that that is made possible.

**Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con):** It is vital to forbear from agreeing a price before negotiations begin and to maintain the ability to walk away, isn’t it?

**Dr Fox:** Self-evidently.

**Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP):** Last year, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research told us that leaving the single market would result in a loss of trade of between 22% and 30%, depending on the nature of the Brexit. It also told us that concluding deals with the BRIC countries and the main English-speaking economies would result in an increase in trade of 2% and less than 3% respectively. So although I wish the Secretary of State well in his future negotiations, is it not time to concede that there is no number of new free trade agreements or trade deals he can strike that can possibly compensate for the loss of trade with the European Union?

**Dr Fox:** First, it depends on our level of access to the European market. That is why the Government have put forward proposals to maximise our access to a European trade area. However, it also depends on growth in other markets and, as the International Monetary Fund has said, in the next five years 90% of global growth will be outside continental Europe. That is where the opportunities will be, and that is where Britain needs to be, too.

**Leaving the EU: Exports**

4. **Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP):** What proportion of his Department’s staff are supporting businesses that export to the EU in preparation for the UK leaving the EU?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Graham Stuart):** Merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, the staff and all Members.

[908321]
We have a dedicated overseas European network of 253 staff promoting exports and investment. At home, we have sector and regional teams equally dedicated to the promotion of the UK economic interest. Every one of the 3,920 people in DIT, whatever their specific function, acts to support exports from Scotland and the rest of this United Kingdom.

Gavin Newlands: I am delighted to hear it. Regardless of whether the disastrous agreement that the Government have reached with the EU comes into force, it is indisputable that unless we stay in the single market and the customs union, the UK will become a third country in its EU trade relations. Has the Minister included in the export strategy a position on whether businesses will have to get economic operator registration and identification—EORI—numbers if they want to export to the EU, our largest marketplace by far?

Graham Stuart: Of course, it is important to remember that for Scotland, the rest of the United Kingdom is its largest marketplace by far. More than 60% of trade from Scotland goes to the rest of the United Kingdom, whereas just 17% goes to the entirety of the rest of the EU. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman lean on his Front Benchers and try to ensure that his party, as the other Opposition parties should do, joins the Government in getting a deal with the EU that makes sure that Scottish exporters and those in rest of the country can have the best deal possible.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): Mr Speaker, I wish you a happy Christmas and a calmer recess.

I congratulate the three wise men on the Front Bench on the huge effort in exporting UK plc. However, it is my understanding that exports account for only about 30% of our GDP, compared with 47% in Germany. Where do they think the greatest opportunities are, within or outside Europe, to narrow that gap and export more to the rest of the world?

Graham Stuart: I thank my hon. Friend for that entirely useful question, which highlights the importance of increasing exports. As a percentage of GDP, our exports have been in the 20s seemingly for time immemorial. We have got the figure over 30% and we have set a target of reaching 35%. The whole country needs to engage in this more. We think that there are more companies that could export and do not than there are companies that can and do. That is why the Department has been set up and why are we are dedicated to trying to increase that percentage. We want to improve performance in all parts of the United Kingdom. For example, in Scotland, exports constitute just over 20% of GDP, whereas the figure is more than 30% in the United Kingdom overall.

Future Trade Agreements

5. Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to ensure that future trade agreements deliver economic benefits to all constituent nations and regions of the UK; and if he will he make a statement. [908322]

The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): This Government are committed to working closely with all nations and regions to deliver a future trade policy that works for the whole of the UK, and we will continue to engage with the devolved Administrations. I visited Cardiff on 15 October, where I discussed this topic with Assembly Members. The Board of Trade will also ensure that the benefits of free trade are spread throughout the UK.

Chris Elmore: A very merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to the Minister for his answer. However, will he elaborate on his work with the Welsh Government to ensure that when trade agreements are made, regional investment happens across the south Wales valleys, north Wales and mid Wales and benefits the whole of Wales rather than focusing, for example, on cities, so that valley communities like mine can really benefit from the economic development that comes from trade agreements?

George Hollingbery: We are currently working on a concordat with the Welsh Government, through which they can contribute directly to the process for free trade agreements. I would expect them to make those points to us and tell us where the industries that matter to them are. We can therefore construct our free trade policies around that input.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Increased trade inevitably leads to more business for our major ports, such as Immingham in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that free trade zones and free ports are worthy of serious consideration post-Brexit?

George Hollingbery: All I can say at the moment is that anything that can be done to increase free trade in the future should be looked at. Indeed, free ports have been looked at and I know that my hon. Friend has been a great champion of the idea. We will continue those discussions.

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): Supporting our regional economies through trade agreements is about more than just growing exports and opening markets to our producers; trade agreements should also be used to unlock and encourage investment across the UK. A recent report by the Centre for Towns shows that in 2017 nearly 60% of foreign direct investment went to the UK’s biggest cities, that 70% of that went to London, and that towns and communities elsewhere have seen FDI decline or remain flat. When will the Government listen to Labour and take the action needed to rebalance the economy and attract FDI right across the country?

George Hollingbery: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and, indeed, the whole Labour Front-Bench team for our associations and discussions during the year, which have, on the whole, been friendly and constructive.

The hon. Lady will be glad to hear that the Government absolutely understand the issue. Our foreign direct investment programme has begun to look at pre-packaging offers out in the regions, particularly in smaller towns, which quite a lot of major potential investors will not know of—they will not know about the skillsets there or about the availability of land and so on. They have been pre-packed into larger blocks so that foreign direct
investors can be presented with them as places where they can take their investment outside London and the major cities.

**Topical Questions**

**T1. [908347] Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.**

Dr Fox: We constantly review the mechanisms by which we can give that advice. One of the things that came across clearly from our consultation on the export strategy was that businesses were looking for peer information rather than information from higher sources. That is why the Government have taken on extra staff for our online community for businesses, so that they can get real-time information from similar businesses.

**T2. [908348] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):**

Mr Speaker, I am sure you will join me in condemning the mindless thug who threw a bottle at man of the match Dele Alli last night. I will indicate the 2:0 score so that you do not have to read my lips.

With UK exports to Israel up 30%, what steps will my right hon. Friend take to ensure that we increase trade with Israel as we move forward outside the European Union?

Dr Fox: Absolutely not. This country takes very seriously its own international human rights and ethical responsibilities. In fact, I would go so far as to say that, rather than being an apologist, the United Kingdom is a great supporter and champion of those very values globally.

**T3. [908349] Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab):**

According to the north-east chamber of commerce, businesses in the north-east are concerned about the future of international trade deals, and especially about rules of origin, after March next year. What can the Minister say to reassure our north-east businesses?

Dr Fox: That the House of Commons should vote for the Government’s proposal, which will deal with those very issues, to ensure that we get continuity of trade.

**T4. [908353] Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con):**

People in Japan, Singapore and China are getting a taste of Somerset, because Sheppy’s cider from my constituency of Taunton Deane is increasingly being exported to those countries, which is really exciting. Can the Secretary of State give us some news about the work we are doing with China on potential trade and investment?

Dr Fox: As part of the UK-China joint trade and investment review announced in January 2018, officials of both countries took part in the third series of technical discussions in Beijing in November. I am happy for my team to be promoting the benefits of Sheppy’s, but I want them to ensure that people also enjoy the wonderful taste of Thatchers, made in North Somerset.

**T5. [908354] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con):**

I wish you, Mr Speaker, the staff of the House and all colleagues a very happy Christmas.

What early assessment has my right hon. Friend made of UK exports in this festive period?

Dr Fox: British business continues to export strongly. For example, we are working with companies such as Hawkins & Brimble to maximise global retail opportunities. I am pleased to say that, thanks to help from the Department, the business will be lining the shelves of 300 stores in Canada and the United States with its range of male grooming products—a subject that I know is close to my hon. Friend’s heart—after securing £500,000 of contracts.

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

How many freedom of information requests has the Secretary of State’s Department withheld on grounds of cost?
The Minister for Trade Policy (George Hollingbery): I am not aware of the exact statistic for cost, but I will happily admit to the House that our record on freedom of information requests in the past has not been good enough. However, a great deal of effort has been put into trying to ensure that we respond on time, and in the latest quarterly report from only yesterday we managed to reach 90%, which is what we were trying to achieve. If the hon. Gentleman wishes, I will happily write to him with an answer.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): The UK Israel Tech Hub estimates that the tech partnerships that it has created have an economic impact on the UK of around £800 million. What can we do to continue to grow this mutually beneficial relationship?

Dr Fox: The Tech Hub has been a huge success and a great example of the sort of model that we should be looking at, but we hope to be able to expand that relationship through the trade and investment conference that we will hold in 2019, which will be a celebration not only of our record of trade with Israel, but of the future of our trade with Israel.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Sheep farmers in my constituency export 92% of their produce to Europe and beyond, but have absolutely no idea what is going to happen to their product after 29 March next year. What comfort can the Secretary of State give those sheep farmers to allow them to enjoy a happy Christmas?

Dr Fox: Were there to be no deal, that would be a problem for the export of sheepmeat to Europe, so there is one clear answer available to the right hon. Gentleman, which is to support the Government’s proposal, which will enable his constituents to get the market assuredness that they want.

May I finish by wishing you, Mr Speaker, the Members of the House and particularly the staff of the House of Commons a very happy Christmas? Earlier the shadow Secretary of State mentioned the words about the wise men that we heard in Prayers this morning. We would do well to remember that if the wise men had not been characteristic courtesy.

Mr Speaker: I thank the Secretary of State for his characteristic courtesy.

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

English Language Skills: Employability

1. Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support women with limited English language skills to improve their employability.

The Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills and Skills (Anne Milton): The Government Equalities Office is considering how best to deliver new funded programmes for people who face barriers to getting into work for the first time. We are also working with the Learning and Work Institute to develop best practice guidance on building effective local networks and partnerships.

Vicky Ford: During the Afghanistan war, many local people put their lives at risk by using their language skills to help our military, and some of those families were evacuated to Chelmsford. The English for Women project helped some of those women, and it now supports women of more than 30 nationalities to become involved in their communities, and to improve their employability. Will my right hon. Friend thank all those volunteers at the English for Women project in Chelmsford, and suggest ways to help them to network with likeminded organisations across the country?

Anne Milton: I certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking all volunteers at English for Women, which is a remarkable project. Such Government-funded programmes have supported more than 73,000 isolated adults—most of whom are women—to improve their English language skills, and, as my hon. Friend says, such support is about building confidence, people’s ability to get into good jobs, and integration in local communities.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): A merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, all the staff, and the police and security services who keep us safe.

Newcastle benefits from many volunteers and charitable organisations such as the Angelou Centre, the West End Women and Girls Centre, and the West End Refugee Service, which support women to learn English and improve their employability. There is, however, a lack of central Government funding for adult and lifelong education. Will the Minister speak to the Education Secretary about the importance of investment in adult education, particularly for isolated and vulnerable women, and will she meet me and the all-party group for adult education, which I chair, to discuss how we can make progress in that vital area?

Anne Milton: I am very happy to meet the hon. Lady at any time because, as she rightly says, this is a vital area. We are spending £1.5 billion on adult education, some of which has been devolved to combined authorities and also delegated to London. It will be interesting to see how those different areas best use that money in education—in a way, they are like pilot schemes. I have also seen extremely innovative projects that work with women with children, and help them to help their children with school tests and such things, as a way of improving their own English. Those are often women who would not otherwise have come forward.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What are the Government doing to support women in their communities who are isolated as a result of poor English language skills?

Anne Milton: I have commented on the English language courses we are running, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government also has a big programme. Integration is uppermost in our minds at the moment, and the first step towards integrating people and helping them to gain confidence is for them to have good English language skills.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I offer best wishes for a merry Christmas to you, Mr Speaker, and to everyone in the House, from me as the Member of Parliament for Strangford, and from all my Strangford constituents who are very much involved in these issues.

Will the Minister outline whether funding is available for already trained teachers to be trained in either TESOL, the teaching of English to speakers of other languages, or CELTA, the certificate in teaching English to speakers of other languages, to teach English within communities and community centres?

Anne Milton: I will have to get back to the hon. Gentleman to ensure that I give him a precise answer. We are undertaking a trial this year and fully funding adults who earn less than the pay threshold of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission—just under £16,000. Encouraging women to get on English language courses and improve their skills is an important area to focus on. We are talking about women who are just in employment and on very low wages and who, of course, face significant difficulties if they lose their jobs—their progress will be limited by that.

Vulnerable Women: Return to Work

2. Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op):
When the Government plan to launch the fund to support vulnerable women who want to return to work.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): Last month, I announced the next phase of our returners programme—£500,000 targeted at those with additional barriers to participating in the labour market, including those who speak little English, people with disabilities, and those who are homeless or have been victims of domestic abuse.

Mr Sweeney: Does the Minister think that the fund is resourced sufficiently to help with the huge roll-out of universal credit, which disproportionately impacts on women? That is especially so in my constituency of Glasgow North East, which will have the highest number of universal credit claimants in Scotland: more than 16,000. It is vital that we have a targeted programme to assist women, who will be disproportionately affected. Will the Minister lobby hard for extra resources to focus on the women worst affected by the roll-out of universal credit?

Penny Mordaunt: Our returners programme is not designed to do what the hon. Gentleman has asked; it is a distinct fund. We have also announced some additional money to support women facing the greatest barriers to getting into the labour market. We should absolutely be talking to every Government Department, including the Department for Work and Pensions, about universal credit and other policies, to ensure that they are supporting women.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many women, and how many men, does my right hon. Friend expect the returners fund to support?

Penny Mordaunt: The fund is just one piece of work that the Government are doing, but it is focused primarily on women. However, my hon. Friend raises an important point. If he is aware of my recent speech at Bright Blue, he will know that we are also very focused on addressing the barriers that prevent men from taking up the roles that they would wish to do—being prime carers for their children, for example. We are also looking at those issues, and my hon. Friend is right to raise them.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op):
I recently met a group of Somali women in my constituency who are very concerned about the wellbeing and employment of Somali women in our community. They have faced all sorts of barriers, and those barriers appear to be getting worse; the women are now identifying a rise in depression. Will the Minister write to me explaining how the fund she is launching will be able to contribute to the support that the women in my constituency need, so that they can access some desperately needed resources?

Penny Mordaunt: Absolutely. I will happily write to the hon. Lady with further details about what we and others in the Government are doing. She is absolutely right to point to this issue. White women have an employment rate of 73.3%; that of women of Bangladeshi ethnicity, for example, is just 32.8%. Bringing my Department into the Cabinet Office, co-located with the race disparity unit, will help greatly in addressing the multiple disadvantages that people face.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP):
I wish you, Mr Speaker, all hon. Members and everyone across my constituency a merry Christmas.

The Minister has stated that she hopes that the returners fund will help women trapped in zero-hours contracts and low paid and low skilled work. Will she speak to her colleagues at the Department for Work and Pensions to ask for a review of how universal credit, in-work conditionality and sanctions are damaging the prospects of low paid women?

Penny Mordaunt: It will come as no surprise to the hon. Lady that I am already speaking to the Department for Work and Pensions about a whole raft of issues. We need to focus much more on broadening the work of the Government Equalities Office towards addressing the issues of low paid women. Women with low pay will often still be in low paid work a decade later. We need to look at the barriers to their having the career progression and the training that they want, while enabling them to cope with all the other things that women do.

Disabling People: Elections

3. Damien Moore (Southport) (Con):
What steps the Government are taking to support more disabled people to stand for election.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt):
We are undertaking a programme of work with disability organisations to help political parties better support disabled candidates. In the meantime, to ensure that support is in place for the local elections next year, we have launched the £250,000 EnAble fund, which is an interim fund to support disabled candidates.
Penny Mordaunt: We are making good progress. We have met a number of political parties and disability organisations, including Disability Rights UK and Mencap, and those meetings will continue into the new year. It is very important that political parties support all candidates; by sharing good practice and doing this work in a much more methodical way, I hope that all political parties will be able to do so in the coming years.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The Secretary of State is absolutely right that political parties must play their part in allowing more people with disabilities to run for office. During the Ask Her To Stand campaign, Members took it upon themselves to invite women into the House to be able to understand its functions. Does she think that it could be an option to consider inviting disabled constituents into this place, as well as council chambers and devolved Administrations, so that Parliament can become more open? People could then get a better understanding of this place and not think of it as some sort of isolated institution that they could never possibly serve in.

Penny Mordaunt: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. We should be doing that, and I encourage all political parties to do so. People who support various political parties are looking at replicating organisations such as Women2Win, which we have in the Conservative party, and at what further support and schemes can be put in place to encourage people from a whole range of backgrounds and situations to be able to run for office. We need to make the Chamber a much more diverse place.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): We do not just want disabled people to stand for election; we want them to be elected to this place, yet this workplace here takes so little account of disabled people’s needs. Would it not be better to have more predictable working hours and voting patterns, similar to practices in other Parliaments, to encourage more disabled people to stand for election and to help all Members with caring responsibilities?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend made a commitment to work with political parties to help support disabled candidates. Can she give a further update on how that work is going?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. She is right to pay tribute to Mr Speaker for the internship programme, which has been very successful and is very much appreciated. I hold the Women and Equalities brief alongside my role in the Department for International Development. That provides an opportunity, because there is huge synergy between what we in the UK are doing to meet our own global goals and meeting our responsibility to the developing world. The work initiated by the global disability summit is gathering huge pace and momentum around the world to enable other countries, whether through new legislation or sharing best practice and ideas, to make progress for their own disabled communities.

Breast Cancer Screening Programme

5. Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the adequacy of the breast cancer screening programme.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Our breast cancer screening programme provides a world-leading service, inviting more than 2.5 million women for a test each year, detecting cancer earlier and saving lives.

Mohammad Yasin: The independent breast screening review found that a lack of clarity over when women should receive their invitations had caused the error that resulted in 67,000 women not being invited to their final breast screening. Will the Government implement the review’s recommendations and introduce guidance to clarify the ages at which women should be invited for routine screening?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is right. The review found that the breast screening incident that was made public in May had arisen because of a lack of alignment between the national service specification and the way in which the programme was being run in practice. As a result, NHS England has announced a comprehensive review of cancer screening programmes, to be undertaken by Professor Sir Mike Richards. We will take account of the findings of both that review and our own breast screening review to ensure that changes improve the whole system.

Shared Parental Leave

6. Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to promote the take-up of shared parental leave to help tackle the gender pay gap.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): Earlier this year, we ran a £1.5 million campaign to promote awareness and the take-up of shared parental leave and pay. We are currently evaluating the scheme, looking at
take-up and the barriers to it and at how the scheme is being used in practice. We expect to publish our findings next summer.

**Luke Hall:** I thank the Minister for the work that is already being done. Does she agree that it is important to recognise, as part of that work, that cultural change is required to increase the take-up of shared parental leave? That will include raising awareness, challenging stereotypes and ensuring that we, as community leaders, have a role and are engaged with it.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** Given that 33% of people say that mothers of pre-school children should stay at home and only 7% say that they should be in full-time work, I have to agree with my hon. Friend. Cultural change will not happen overnight, but shared parental leave is an important step, and we are considering further activity to raise awareness, promote take-up and make the scheme easier for parents to access.

**Naz Shah** (Bradford West) (Lab): Although I welcome the Government’s efforts to reduce the gender pay gap, they pledged in 2017 to tackle racial pay disparities. In the same year, Baroness McGregor-Smith found that greater workplace diversity could boost Britain’s economy by £24 billion a year. When do the Government plan to act on their pledge? Our economy could certainly do with an extra £24 billion, given the Brexit shambles that they have created.

**Kelly Tolhurst:** We backed the McGregor-Smith review of racial issues in the workplace. We wanted businesses to publish their data on ethnicity and pay voluntarily, but the Prime Minister announced in October that, rather than waiting for them to do so, we would take action. A consultation is in progress and will end on 11 January, and we will consider then how best to implement its recommendations.

**Helen Whately** (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Too often, women face discrimination at work when they are pregnant or on maternity leave, or when they return to work. Although that is illegal, it seems that the law is not working. What steps are the Government taking to end maternity discrimination?

**Kelly Tolhurst:** My hon. Friend has raised a particularly important point. We want to do whatever we can to tackle such discrimination. We are currently reviewing the redundancy protections for pregnant women and new mothers, and we hope to take further steps early next year. On Monday, we launched the good work plan, under which employees will receive a written statement of their entitlements in the workplace on their first day at work and which will potentially reduce the incidence of discrimination. Transparency is what we are aiming for, and we will do as much as we can to ensure that those people are protected.

**Domestic Abuse: Public Health Strategy**

7. **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on a long-term public health strategy to help prevent domestic abuse. [908342]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): Merry Christmas to one and all! I say that because although Christmas is a time of festivity, it is also, sadly, a time when the number of incidents involving domestic violence increases exponentially. I hope to be able to inform the House of ways in which we can help to spread the message that if anyone is suffering domestic abuse over the festive period they can—and please, must—seek help.

The Home Secretary chairs an interministerial group on violence against women and girls, which aims to ensure that all Departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care, work together to make dealing with crimes such as domestic abuse a priority. We will publish our response, including our draft domestic abuse Bill, shortly.

**Vicky Foxcroft:** I welcome last week’s debate on the public health approach to tackling youth violence. Domestic violence can be a key trigger of trauma in young people’s lives and they need this strategy to be published and properly funded as soon as possible. May I urge the Minister, who is also part of the Home Office team, to do all she can to make sure this strategy is published as soon as possible?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady, who has done so much work on the specific issue of youth violence, including her work on the commission. She knows, following last week’s very good debate, that the Government are absolutely committed to treating serious violence as a public health issue, but we are very much committed also to ensuring that domestic abuse within the serious violence sphere is tackled in hospitals and GP surgeries, because often the NHS is the touchstone that victims of domestic abuse can use to seek help when they find that they are in a place to be able to do so.

8. [908343] **Victoria Prentis** (Banbury) (Con): I am concerned about the long-term effect on children of domestic abuse in the family home. Is tackling this part of the Government strategy?

**Victoria Atkins:** Very much so, and we know that domestic abuse has a devastating impact on children and young people. Home should be a place of safety; it should not be a place of fear and violence. We have launched an £8 million fund to support children affected by domestic abuse and services that can help in that. We have also provided money to roll out an amazing project called Operation Encompass, so that there is a person in every school whom the police can contact before the school day starts, to inform the school if a child has witnessed a domestic abuse incident the previous night so that child is treated in a gentle and comforting way during the school day, having witnessed some trauma at home.

**Rebecca Pow** (Taunton Deane) (Con): Has the Secretary of State also had discussions with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care on the benefits of sport for women in improving their wellbeing, because women traditionally take part in a lot less sport than men? On that note, will she also congratulate the women’s netball team for its fantastic achievement in being voted team of the year in the BBC sports personality awards, and does she agree that they are a great role model?
Victoria Atkins: I am very grateful to the hon. Friend for promoting me momentarily. She is right: sport can have an enormously positive impact on people’s lives. Obviously in the context of domestic abuse and serious violence, we are very conscious that sport can be a great way to reach out to young people and help them to make positive life choices. I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and I understand, too, that there are plans for a parliamentary netball team, which I will not volunteer for—I am more of a hockey player—but I am sure that is something to look forward to in the new year.

Victoria Atkins: We are very conscious of the additional pressures women in the asylum system face, particularly if they are in the system through family visas, where, sadly, we know there are cases where the perpetrators of the violence are the people on whom they rely for their asylum status. UK Visas and Immigration has set up a safeguarding hub to look at whether urgent intervention is necessary in each asylum case, and that obviously includes domestic abuse. We are concentrating on this in the forthcoming package of domestic abuse measures.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to wish you, yours and everyone associated with the House Nadogol llawen? For the benefit of Hansard, that means merry Christmas.

Survivors of domestic abuse and their children need more protection. I have heard from too many victims whose children are forced through family court orders to spend time with an abusive and sometimes dangerous parent. Rachel Williams and Sammy Woodhouse are two such victims. Their petitions have gathered half a million signatures. Rachel and Sammy are speaking out, so when will the Government listen and strengthen the law to support victims and their children?

Victoria Atkins: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her question. I had the privilege of meeting Sammy some months ago to discuss the complexities of her case. We clearly do not want the family courts to be used as another forum in which abusers can continue their abuse. The hon. Lady will know that I and my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice are working together on the Bill, but also on educating those who work in the tribunal and court systems to be alert to that possibility.

Topical Questions

T1. [908355] Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Penny Mordaunt): I want to ensure that people across the country have financial independence and resilience, as well as a real choice and influence over the economic decisions in their lives. That means doing more for low-paid and financially fragile women, who face multiple barriers and are currently reaping the fewest economic rewards. I will publish a strategy in late spring, outlining our vision and plans to promote gender equality and economic empowerment. It will outline how the Government Equalities Office, from its new Cabinet Office home, will work across Government and with business and civil society to tackle persistent gendered inequalities that limit economic empowerment at every stage of life.

Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to wish you and all Members and staff of the House a very merry Christmas?

Bill Esterson: The majority of people in insecure employment are women. The right to ask for more hours, which was announced on Monday, already exists, and it is no right at all because the employer can just say no. Will the Minister therefore tell the Business Secretary that if he is serious about making a difference to women in part-time work, he will have to do significantly better than this?

Penny Mordaunt: I take a different view and welcome the announcement to which the hon. Gentleman refers, and others that this Government have made on supporting women, whatever stage they are at in their lives and careers. However, I think that we need to do more. That is why I am broadening the remit of the Government Equalities Office and creating an equalities hub in the Cabinet Office, at the heart of Government. We are already working with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, but we do that with every Government Department, because only when we do that will we be able to move at the speed necessary to meet the ambition of women in this country.

T3. [908358] Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): This is the season of good will, and some minds will be turning to the new year’s honours list. Those who receive honours are rightly recognised for their outstanding public service, regardless of their gender, sexuality or beliefs, but the same is not true of the treatment of their spouses. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the honours system should treat all spouses with similar courtesy, whether they are men or women, gay or straight?

Penny Mordaunt: My right hon. Friend makes an incredibly important point. The Cabinet Office is doing great work to create more diversity in the honours list, but inequality is baked into the system, including in the use of courtesy titles. It is quite wrong that people are treated differently in this way, so I have written to my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister to ask that it is remedied.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to wish you, Mr Speaker, everyone who works here and all Members a very merry Christmas? On the Christmas theme,

There are five days to Christmas, so will the Minister promise me:

An action plan to close the pay gap;
To end period poverty;
Sustainable funding for refugees;
Section 106 of the Equality Act;
Paid leave for domestic survivors;
And no more austerity?
Penny Mordaunt: I wish those on the Opposition Front Bench a very merry Christmas. The hon. Lady is right to present us with a list—I too have a list—[Hos. Members: “Sing it!”] No, I would not inflict that on Members. She is right to raise those important issues. I certainly wish to ensure that the Government Equalities Office can deliver on those issues, but also on other areas. From April next year, when the GEO will be in its new home, we will be able to do that much more effectively. In the meantime, we will be producing additional work, including the strategy I just referred to in my topical statement, which I think will be of huge assistance to all Government Departments in delivering for women.

T6. [908361] Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps are being taken to improve accessibility to tax-free childcare for carers and other economically inactive women who are looking to take on part-time work?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Carers do a huge amount and are often unsung heroes. Both they and other economically inactive women may be entitled to support of up to 85% of their eligible childcare costs, through universal credit. That is in addition to the Government’s 15 hours’ free childcare entitlement for three and four-year-olds and disadvantaged two-year-olds. Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs is currently running a campaign to raise awareness of tax-free childcare, including through a new marketing strategy launched in September this year.

T2. [908359] Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Will the Minister for Women and Equalities speak to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about how they can mitigate the difficulties and hardship that women who were born in the early 1950s are experiencing?

Penny Mordaunt: I am very pleased to help the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) and Members of this House a very happy Christmas?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Justin Tomlinson): Fear not, Mr Speaker: I will not sing my answer and ruin the festive spirit.

The subject raised by the hon. Gentleman has been debated extensively and we have already put in place an additional £1.1 billion-worth of transitional arrangements. Despite the fact that a retired female would expect to get the state pension for 22 years, which is two years more than a retired male, thanks to our reforms more than 3 million more women will receive an average of £550 per year more by 2030.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I have taken on board your wise words on perseverance, Mr Speaker, so when will my right hon. Friend introduce proposals to repeal the Equality Act 2010, which makes specific provision for caste as a protected characteristic?

Penny Mordaunt: My hon. Friend is consistent and persistent, and he is right to be. We obviously need a suitable legislative vehicle and parliamentary time, but our request to proceed with drafting has been cleared by the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee. On the guidance that we want to provide, we are confident that we can publish it before summer.

T5. [908360] Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I have a very vulnerable constituent who was kidnapped and raped abroad and then had to stay in the country for the trial. She has now returned home to the UK, but has been refused benefits after failing the habitual residence test. Will the Minister speak to her ministerial colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and ask them to meet me urgently to discuss this horrific case?

The Minister for Women (Victoria Atkins): I am very concerned to hear that. I note the work that is going on through all-party groups to help victims of crimes and their families overseas. I will of course take away what the hon. Lady has said, and if she would like to meet me to discuss the case, I would be happy to. I will also ensure that the Minister from the relevant Department meets her.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Merry Christmas, Mr Speaker, and commiserations on last night’s football result.

Will the Minister welcome the work of Cats Protection, which fosters cats to enable women to flee domestic violence safe in the knowledge that their family pet is well looked after until they find a secure home?

Victoria Atkins: I must declare an interest, because I own the most beautiful cat in the world.

I am delighted to hear of that organisation and the work that it does. It is a fantastic charity, and I think I should visit it as a priority, as part of not only my Home Office role but my ministerial cat responsibilities.

Mr Speaker: What is the name of this beautiful cat?

Victoria Atkins: Her full name, as given by my four-year-old at the time, is Gaston the Turbo Snail. [Laughter.]

Mr Speaker: I wonder why I did not know that. I am as near to speechless as I have ever been.

T7. [908362] Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): . Mr Speaker, may I, too, wish you, all the staff and Members of this House a very happy Christmas? However, over this Christmas season women survivors of domestic abuse in households receiving universal credit will find it harder to leave than they should if their universal credit payment is paid to their abuser. Only yesterday, the director of Women’s Aid said of the Government’s ongoing refusal to introduce automatic split payments for universal credit:

“We know from our research into the impact of universal credit that it risks exacerbating financial abuse for survivors and poses an additional barrier to survivors’ ability to escape the abuse.”

What representations is the Minister for Women and Equalities making to the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions to urge her to address this outrageous inequality now?

Justin Tomlinson: I have met Women’s Aid three times in the past month, as well as Refuge and ManKind, as we are looking to improve the support available through universal credit, based on the three key principles. The first is identifying people, whereby those organisations are helping directly to sort out training and guidance for all our frontline staff so that people can be identified as quickly as possible. Secondly, we are building on the principle of referring, so that all local and national partnerships are then made available. Finally, we are
supporting people, to make sure they are fast-tracked to get a single status universal credit claim, advance payments and, where appropriate, split payments.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): The Government’s new code of practice is a welcome step in tackling sexual harassment in the workplace, but will the Minister listen to the concerns of the Fawcett Society and provide a formal duty on employers to prevent harassment in the workplace, without which the code falls short and women will be left to deal with this problem on their own?

Victoria Atkins: I very much understand the call for a formal duty and we listen to it carefully, as we do to the Women and Equalities Committee report. We have committed to consulting on that, because this is very complex and we need to make sure we understand not only the scale of the problem, but potential answers to it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are, as colleagues can see, running late, but there is no particular pressure on time today and I would like to accommodate remaining colleagues.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): The Minister will know that recently I got involved in tackling this vile practice of sex for rent, and we all understand it is a complex problem. I am grateful for the review of the guidelines and that new guidelines are going to be issued to the Crown Prosecution Service in the new year, but will he consider a review that actually looks at the complex problems that lead to the fact that this vile practice continues to be widespread, although it is a criminal offence?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Rory Stewart): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the number of times she has raised this issue in the House. Both the Minister with responsibility for victims and the Minister with responsibility for courts are looking specifically at this issue. As the hon. Lady is aware, there are complexities relating to stigmatising the individual who is themselves a victim, but we will continue to work on that and we look forward to working more closely with her on this subject.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Following the earlier exchange with the Minister for Women and Equalities on disability access, does she agree that one way we can improve access to this place is by Members underlining in the restoration and renewal consultation process, when they are approached, that improving disability access to this place is a priority for all of us?

Penny Mordaunt: That is an incredibly good suggestion. I have had discussions with Mr Speaker about the opportunities that the refurbishment of this Palace presents us with. I hope that all Members, who I know care deeply about these issues, with many having signed up to be Disability Confident employers and wanting to help that agenda, will see that that is another way in which we as individuals help to provide support.
ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts and Measures:

- Civil Liability Act 2018
- Ivory Act 2018
- Health and Social Care (National Data Guardian) Act 2018
- Prisons (Interference with Wireless Telegraphy) Act 2018
- Courts and Tribunals (Judiciary and Functions of Staff) Act 2018
- Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018
- University of London Act 2018
- Ecumenical Relations Measure 2018
- Church of England (Miscellaneous Provisions) Measure 2018
- Church Property Measure 2018

Deaths of Homeless People

Mr Speaker: Before I call the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) to ask her urgent question, may I express my sadness on behalf of the whole House at the death yesterday in the subway outside this House? I also ask Members to be aware that, in advance of an inquest, the facts are not, and cannot be, fully known, and therefore please to show some restraint in commenting on that case, out of respect to the family and friends of the individual concerned.

10.46 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government what he is doing to prevent the deaths of people who are homeless.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): Every death of someone sleeping rough on our streets is one too many. Each is a tragedy, each a life cut short. In particular, I share the sadness that every Member will feel on learning of the death of a homeless man close to Parliament only yesterday. As you say, Mr Speaker, while we must allow the investigations to take place, I will be asking Westminster City Council to refer this to its safeguarding adults board to look into the matter and see that lessons are learned and applied.

Today’s publication of Office for National Statistics data on the estimated number of deaths of homeless people is stark, with an estimated 597 deaths of homeless people in England and Wales in 2017. It is simply unacceptable for lives to be cut short in this way. I believe we have a moral duty to act. The Government are committed to halving rough sleeping by 2022 and ending it by 2027. Last week, we published our rough-sleeping strategy delivery plan, which sets out how we will do this. It gives updates on progress we have already made on the 61 commitments in the strategy and sets out clear milestones for activity.

That said, this is about action now. Our rough-sleeping initiative, backed by £30 million of funding this year, is delivering at least 1,750 new bed spaces and an additional 500 outreach workers in areas across the country where rough sleeping is most prevalent. Only this week, we announced the location of 11 rough-sleeping hubs across the country to provide immediate shelter and rapid assessment now, which will help thousands of people over the next two years.

Today’s statistics underline the need to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place. We are investing £1.2 billion to reduce and prevent homelessness. Much of this funding is already having an impact, providing vital support to help people off the streets for good. Early intervention and prevention are the key, and that has been the focus of the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which came into force in April this year. We will continue to work tirelessly with local authorities and partners across the country to ensure we provide the advice and support they need, but I recognise that this cold weather period is a particularly difficult time. That is why I launched an additional £5 million cold weather fund in October. The fund has already enabled
us to increase outreach work further and to extend winter shelter provision, providing more than 400 additional bed spaces.

The death of anyone who is homeless is a tragedy. We remain focused and resolute in our commitment to make rough sleeping a thing of the past, and where we need to do more, we will.

Melanie Onn: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. I share your sympathies with the friends and family of Gyula Remes, the 43-year-old who died two nights ago in the underpass to the entrance to this Palace in which we all sit. I am sure that all colleagues will be as distressed and shocked as I was, but this is not the first time. It is not even the first time this year: in February, another man died in the same place. So what will it take to shake this Government out of their complacency and out of their outsourcing of responsibility?

Today, the Office for National Statistics data tells us that there were an estimated 597 deaths of homeless people in 2017 alone. Not only could the actual figure be much higher, but it is one that has gone up by 24% since 2013. These figures are the result of an increasingly fracturing system of social security and support. They are the result of Government decisions and Government choices. Five thousand people on any given night can be sleeping rough in this country. Crisis estimates that 24,000 will be sleeping rough in cars, tents and makeshift beds this winter, while 120,000 children are without a permanent home. This cannot be acceptable.

When social security payments are delayed, frustrated or stopped; when mental health services are overstretched, with thresholds so high as to be inaccessible; when council budgets are slashed so that outreach services are lost and drug and alcohol support minimised; when we have an explosion of insecure work; and when people struggle to see their GP—all of these combine to leave those at the highest risk of homelessness out in the cold, and that is literally.

Rather than blaming vulnerable people, as the Secretary of State did in his article yesterday in The Guardian, for these failings by saying that it was their fault—relationship breakdowns and irresponsible behaviour—will he say whether he recognises that the welfare state should be a safety net for our society? If he does, will he say that it is not currently working? Will he acknowledge that more support in the availability of and access to health support—mental and physical—is needed, and that homelessness and homeless deaths should be treated as a public health issue, not solely one of housing?

Does the Secretary of State accept that selling off council houses and housing association properties reduces the number of properties available for local authorities quickly to house vulnerable people in? Will he match Labour’s £100 million cold weather plan to give every rough sleeper somewhere to stay during the winter? This place has proved, under previous Administrations, that it does not need to wait nine years to solve a homelessness problem. If previous Administrations can do it, why cannot he?

James Brokenshire: I would say to the hon. Lady that I share a great deal of her focus, her attention and the issues she has flagged up to the House this morning. I would challenge her very firmly on what she said, in a direct accusation, about my own viewpoint on rough sleeping. No one—no one—chooses to be on the street. No one chooses that life.

The figures that the hon. Lady rightly highlights are stark, as I indicated in my initial response. What is also stark is the 50% increase in the number of deaths linked to drugs that those figures highlight as well. Therefore, these are complex matters to do with mental health and addiction. Sadly, the evidence does point to the fact that issues such as, for example, the loss of tenancies are factors that lie behind this, as are issues of childhood abuse. There are other factors, too.

That is why we published the rough-sleeping strategy in August, which was to cover all these issues—not just my responsibilities in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but those in relation to welfare and to prisons; we see some of the issues in relation to prisoners simply being released out on to the streets. It is intended to cover, and is covering, all those grounds. I did highlight the action that is being taken now.

The hon. Lady highlighted issues relating to universal credit and the work we are doing with the Department for Work and Pensions to see where further steps may be taken, knowing that some who are vulnerable might find it difficult to find their way through the system. The DWP is providing support and, equally, we are providing additional funding and support through our navigator project and others so that those who are in the most need, the most vulnerable, are able to get the support they need.

There is absolutely no complacency from me or from this side of the House on the need to deal with the urgent issue of rough sleeping and homelessness. It is something that we are taking hugely seriously as a priority, especially in the current cold weather. That is why I have underlined the action that we are taking now. No one chooses to live on the street, and no one should die as a consequence of being homeless or as a consequence of rough sleeping. That is why we are taking action and why I have committed an initial £100 million through the rough-sleeping strategy, in addition to the £30 million that councils are receiving directly this year. That is part of a £1.2 billion effort over homelessness.

There is a sense of action, of purpose and of bringing about change, and that is firmly what I intend to do, and what I am doing, through various measures. I recognise the need for a cross-party spirit, and we are working with the Mayor of London, the Mayor of Manchester and others to ensure that we make rough sleeping a thing of the past and that we deal firmly and in a committed way with the issue of homelessness more broadly.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Mr Speaker, it was more than 30 years ago that your predecessor, Speaker Weatherill, gave tea to Robert K. Andrews, the homeless man who was in Central Lobby for 35 years.

I agree with Tony Benn that a memorial there would be a happy thing for the Badge Messengers and others who helped to look after him.

Joe Dunlop’s play, “The Strange Petitioner”, gives an illustration of the old Robert Andrews talking to the young Robert Andrews about how he came to be on the streets. He had all the services that were possible, but...
he denied them and would not take benefits. He was well cared for at St Martin-in-the-Fields, and he had his funeral there the day after the service for Sir William Stavely. That was a great thing that the church did.

I hope that most of us will not look for simplistic answers and that we will back the Secretary of State’s extra initiatives as well as paying tribute to all the voluntary organisations—including Cyrenians, St Mungo’s, Turning Tides in Worthing and the Samaritans—which deal with this work all the time, together with the council mental health workers, to whom I pay a great tribute.

James Brokenshire: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting the incredible work that is being done across the country and some of the many organisations that are doing it. I would like to pay particular tribute to the London homelessness charity, the Connection at St Martin’s, which had been working with the homeless man who sadly lost his life yesterday. I spent time last night at a homelessness shelter and I heard the stories of two men there. They told me about their difficult challenges and their different pathways into homelessness, both of which were very complex. That underlines the challenges and issues that we are dealing with, and shows why it is important that we take a broad, overarching approach to ensure that we can prevent, intervene and provide a sense of recovery. We must approach this with a concerted focus on all fronts.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I should like to extend my sympathies to the family and friends of Mr Remes. The number of people sleeping rough has more than doubled since 2010, according to the Government’s own figures. Nearly 600 people died on the streets in England and Wales last year, yet the Secretary of State claimed this week that this was not the result of Government policies. Countless charities are pointing to cuts to public services as one of the main contributory factors to the shocking rise in homelessness. Would the hon. Gentleman consider visiting some of these organisations and hearing at first hand what everyone else in the country knows—namely, that austerity is pushing people on to the streets and putting lives at risk? With the roll-out of universal credit, charities are warning that up to 1 million vulnerable people are at risk of destitution and homelessness. Will he also commit to meeting the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and urging her to pause the roll-out of universal credit until it is clear that effective safeguards are in place to ensure that the system does not create a new tier of rough sleepers on our streets? Lastly, on homelessness and domestic abuse, will the Secretary of State tell me what action he is taking to ensure that the vulnerability test is not used as a gatekeeping tool by local authorities in England?

James Brokenshire: I commend my hon. Friend for all his work and efforts in relation to the Homelessness Reduction Act. He points to some of the direct support that is happening as a consequence of that legislation coming into place.

My hon. Friend asks what people should do. Clearly there is the StreetLink app, which is a direct means by which people can identify someone who is living on the streets and see that they get the support and help that they need. From the conversations that I have had with many charities and the voluntary sector, it is clear that help is there. One of the challenges is getting people to take that help and getting them into accommodation where they will be safe and warm. I commend those groups for all of the action that is taking place.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Two years ago, I had the opportunity to go out one cold November night with the rough sleeper team in Kensington. I was hoping to guide the workers to some sites I knew where people to whom I had spoken had been sleeping. However, I was told that they could not count people in any kind of bivouac or tent as rough sleepers. They may be homeless, but they do not count as rough sleepers if they have a covering of any kind over their heads. Is the Secretary of State aware of that, and will he please review it to ensure that vulnerable people do not die alone unnoticed, unmourned and uncounted as rough sleepers?

James Brokenshire: I can absolutely assure the hon. Lady that I want the data to be as accurate and correct as possible. If there are any examples of where that is not taking place, then I am very happy to investigate further. Today’s data is challenging and stark, but it is right that we have that information to ensure that we act and that resources and focus are effectively targeted and delivered so that we are helping people off the street and preventing homelessness and rough sleeping in the first place.
Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend is a compassionate man who is concerned about the many routes that exist to being homeless. We have rough sleepers in St Albans, and, having talked to the council’s chief executive, I know for a fact that they have been approached to try to bring them in. Because of their addictions or drink problems they will not, or cannot, access the services that are on offer, as many of those services do not have a wet facility to allow people with either drink or drug habits to come in. What more can be done to help authorities offer a more varied service for those who cannot drop their dependencies and therefore cannot access many of the services that are on offer?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and important point. We have asked NHS England to provide £30 million of funding over the next five years, specifically targeted in this arena, to provide a rapid audit of health service provision to rough sleepers, including mental health and substance misuse treatment. It is right that my hon. Friend makes this point and equally right that we act.

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): May I start by saying how grateful I am to have received confirmation this morning that the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Bill has now become law? I thank the Secretary of State and the ministerial team for all their support with that.

The Secretary of State has said that homelessness is not simply a result of Government policies, and he is right to cite the complex causes that drive people on to the street, but can he help us to explain why those complex causes—whether it is drug and alcohol abuse or relationship breakdown—have coincidentally risen by 170% since 2010?

James Brokenshire: First and foremost, let me congratulate and commend the hon. Lady for her work on the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act. It was a great moment when Mr Speaker was able to underline that the Bill had been given Royal Assent, so that it is now an Act. The hon. Lady championed the Bill so firmly, and we were pleased to support her in underlining that the Bill had now become law. I thank the Secretary of State and the ministerial team for all their support with that.

I am not going to hide away from the increase in numbers; those figures are profound. This is why we are taking the steps that we are. I pointed to a number of the complex factors that underline this issue, but the situation is stark. I am not going to shirk from the fact that the number of those sleeping rough has increased. It is unacceptable. I am absolutely prepared to look at all evidence in relation to this issue, so that we not only learn but actually make the difference, ensure that we make rough sleeping a thing of the past and take still further action to prevent homelessness in the first place.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The most recent briefing that I received on the scale of this problem by a researcher who is following 100 rough sleepers in our part of London said that the 100% common thread was addiction—to legal drugs such as alcohol, and to illegal drugs. What data does the Secretary of State have about the proportion of addiction to legal and illegal drugs? Does this not reinforce the case that we need a royal commission on the prohibition of narcotic drugs, so that we can assess the costs and benefits of that policy and the implications it has for preventing access to services for people in the way that my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) has just mentioned?

James Brokenshire: My right hon. Friend asks about the evidence. I point him to the Office for National Statistics data that has been released this morning, showing that 190 estimated deaths of homeless people in 2017 were due to drug poisoning; that is 32% of the total number. Alcohol-specific causes accounted for 62 deaths and suicides for 78 deaths, respectively 10% and 13% of the estimated deaths. There is no doubt that drugs and alcohol addiction are a core component of the challenges that we are seeing; which is why we are putting in place additional support. I am profoundly concerned about the implications of new psychoactive substances such as Spice, and the impact that they have had in places such as Manchester and certain parts of London. We are providing additional training and support in relation to those substances and their links to rough sleeping, but we must equally continue to take a very firm approach to drugs.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The tragedy of hundreds of homeless people dying on our streets is shocking, appalling and shameful, but it is not surprising. It is an inevitable consequence of the Government’s failure to address the root causes of rising homelessness. Research from Shelter shows that the Government’s arbitrary benefits cap is now so low that it is not possible for some households, especially households with children, to even cover the cost of rent in the cheapest areas of the country. Will the Government review the cap and remove this completely unnecessary driver of increased and prolonged homelessness?

James Brokenshire: There are a number of causes of people becoming homeless in the first place. For example, security of tenancy is a significant cause, which is why I have consulted on longer tenancies. I will continue to work with the Department for Work and Pensions on universal credit and, where there is evidence, on the links to homelessness. Where further changes may be needed, I will have those discussions with the Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Before I was a Member of Parliament, I volunteered with a homeless outreach service called Thames Reach. I pay tribute to such services for the work that they do. They often work antisocial hours, with personal danger to the individuals involved, but they really make a difference. While volunteering, I learned about the complex reasons for rough sleeping and how common it is for people who are rough sleeping to have mental health problems. What steps are the Government taking to support the mental health needs of people who are rough sleeping?

James Brokenshire: I certainly recognise the picture that my hon. Friend paints about the challenges of mental health and how we respond to the dual diagnosis of mental health problems and addiction. That is why we are asking NHS England to provide an additional £30 million and are looking at ways in which services can be delivered. Part of the funding we are giving is to provide support workers who can sustain people in their accommodation. It is precisely those issues that our approach is intended to respond to.
Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): Three weeks ago I joined the census that shames us, counting rough sleepers in Birmingham. There, beneath the Christmas lights, we found a man without legs sleeping next to his wheelchair in doorways. We found wounded veterans sleeping in arcades. We met a man in the grounds of the cathedral who had had his benefits stopped. We met people fresh out of prison. We met people self-medicating for trauma with drugs and alcohol. These are our neighbours, and some will not survive the winter. Today, coroners do not record homelessness in full on death certificates. That has to change, because we in this House need to know the whole truth about the depths of this scandal. Perhaps then we can shame this Government into dramatically speeding up their timetable to end rough sleeping for good.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the right hon. Gentleman’s passion in relation to this issue, and I take the cases that he highlights hugely seriously. He makes a point about the proper recording of deaths linked to homelessness, and I will certainly take that up with the Ministry of Justice. This is about not only ensuring that we have the data but how we bring about change and learn and apply lessons to see that homelessness is prevented and reduced and that we act to end rough sleeping and save the lives of some of the most vulnerable in our society.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): The people of Chelmsford were very saddened earlier this year by the death of Mr Rob O’Connor in our city centre on a cold winter night, despite the fact that the night shelter had beds available. His case, like many others, was very complex. I was pleased by the Government’s announcement of new Somewhere Safe to Stay centres, which will enable multiple agencies to give individuals the best tailored support. I would love to have one of those in Essex. We have also made bids under the rapid rehousing pathway for more move-on housing, housing navigators and a social lettings agency, to enable faster movement into homes for these complex cases. Will the Secretary of State look favourably on those bids?

James Brokenshire: I note my hon. Friend’s bid for funding from all the different elements we have announced. She makes a difficult and important point about helping people into support. Sadly, in a number of cases, support is provided and accommodation is offered, but for different reasons, that is not taken up. We must all redouble our efforts to encourage people who have been identified to take up that support, which could save their lives.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that no one should die from being homeless, but these statistics show that they clearly are, and in ever greater numbers. He rightly talked about early intervention and prevention. What is he doing personally within Government to lobby for reverses to cuts to drug and alcohol support services?

James Brokenshire: I would point to the additional funding that the rough-sleeping strategy seeks to deliver on the very important elements that are focused on providing support on mental health and other health services, because those issues do, very directly, matter. The rough-sleeping strategy is not set in stone. I have said that there will be annual reviews of the strategy, because I know that we need to respond to changing evidence and changing circumstances. I am determined that where further steps are required, we will take action.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Lewes District Council has a new homelessness outreach team that visits people who are rough sleeping. I welcome the £100 million for the rough-sleeping strategy, but does the Secretary of State not agree that many of the budget cuts to local government, which have reduced mental health services and help for ex-offenders and those with addiction, have cut preventive work to the bone, and that local government needs that funding to be able to prevent rough sleeping in the first place?

James Brokenshire: I hope that my hon. Friend will recognise the provisional statement that I made last week on local government finance, which gave a real-terms increase to local government for the 2019-20 financial year, and indeed provided £650 million of additional support for social care and dealing with some of the most vulnerable to whom she is very firmly pointing. In making her points, I hope she recognises that we have listened to a number of the concerns of local government in seeking to provide that additional finance. Obviously, I will continue to make the case as we look to the spending review next year.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Is it not a reflection on today’s society that before I came here this morning, a major TV channel talked about this issue of deaths of the homeless for about 30 seconds, yet spent 25 minutes talking about what had happened here after PMQs yesterday? The priorities were all wrong. Every death of a homeless person is a stain on our society. If we are judged as a nation and a Government on how we treat our most vulnerable, then our nation and our Government are broken. I will make it my new year’s resolution to do everything I can to alleviate homelessness in this country, whether that be by donating to homeless people or by working on a longer-term strategy in my constituency to try to reduce it. Will the Secretary of State do the same?

James Brokenshire: I can say to the hon. Lady that this is an absolute priority for me. She makes her point about the country and the society we should be very powerfully. In terms of giving directly to the charities, some of them point to the challenges in sustaining people on the streets. The charities sometimes give a difficult and hard message, but it is important to recognise it in that way. I look forward to working with her in the new year as we seek to meet those challenges.

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): Following on from the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), will my right hon. Friend outline what further steps Government can take to help homeless people with mental health issues, because I understand that suicide was a major factor in today’s figures?

James Brokenshire: My hon. Friend will no doubt have heard the figures that I referred to a little while back about some of the causes that contribute to this.
[James Brokenshire]

We are seeking to undertake a rapid audit of health service provision for rough sleepers, including mental health and substance misuse treatment, because sometimes it is very difficult to ensure that access to the services that are there is delivered. That is why we are doing that audit and why the additional funds are being committed to support services as well.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Following a very useful meeting with St Mungo’s, I would like to ask the Secretary of State two things. First, will he work with the DWP to ensure that as part of the universal credit roll-out, outreach workers are sent into hostels, that being the most effective way of ensuring that people are able to claim that benefit? Secondly, does he agree that it is not just a case of ensuring that deaths of homeless people are recorded but that they are fully investigated?

James Brokenshire: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point, and I commend St Mungo’s for its excellent work, for what it does out in our communities and for the difference it is making. I had a conversation with the chief executive of St Mungo’s this morning on some of the work it is doing now and, equally, on how, through our rough-sleeping advisory panel, we continue to work with those across the sector.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about giving help in hostels, and that point was also made to me last night. Within our rough-sleeping strategy we have a navigators programme, which is aimed precisely at guiding people through what is sometimes a complex system to ensure they get the support they need.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) on securing this urgent question, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it.

Of the 600 homeless people who died on our streets last year, 85% were men, one third died of drug poisoning and the highest mortality rates were in London and the north-west of England. Will the Secretary of State ensure that, whatever Government help is provided, it is provided to where it will be most effective?

James Brokenshire: I can assure my hon. Friend that our rough-sleeping initiative is targeted at the 83 areas with the highest pressure and the highest demand. Obviously we will continue to reflect on that as evidence emerges. If the patterns change, clearly we will redirect resources, but he makes an important point about London and the north-west, where a lot of resource is being provided. Indeed, Manchester is one of the areas where we have our Housing First programme, which is aimed at providing help more quickly.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): On my way into Parliament this morning, I stopped to talk to a man who was begging on the embankment. His name is James and he is from Manchester, which he left for personal reasons. James told me that he wants to become a Big Issue seller in the new year, but in the meantime he faces a cold and lonely Christmas. What policies does the Secretary of State have in place to help James and the thousands of other people like him across the country?

James Brokenshire: I misspoke in my last answer. I should have highlighted that our Housing First programme is also in the west midlands and Liverpool.

The hon. Lady mentions immediate support, and I would point to the £30 million that is going to local authorities this year. I would also point to the £5 million cold weather fund, which I announced in October and which is about providing support now, for this winter, to ensure that we are providing accommodation to more people. The last figures I saw show that the fund is delivering more than 400 extra beds, on top of the additional support that has been provided. That sense of urgency and purpose is one that I entirely hear and understand.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, which my friend, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), was so wise in calling for.

Having spent much of my student years working in homeless shelters in the evenings, I am particularly passionate about this cause. Hearing about it today reminds me of those evenings and of the amount of methadone and substance abuse I saw on our streets. Will the Secretary of State please talk not just about the care the Government are providing but about the care that we, as a community, can provide and about how we can shape ourselves as families, as groups and, indeed, as a society to look after the most vulnerable? This is not just about the state; it is about us as individuals and as communities.

James Brokenshire: I absolutely hear my hon. Friend’s point. Of course the Government, local authorities, charities and the voluntary sector all have a key role to play and are doing amazing work. There are things we can do, too. By acting collectively and together, we can provide a solution and answers to the challenges we see.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Many homeless people on the streets have a little dog, which is often their only companion, but they are asked to give up their dog in order to gain a place in a shelter. The all-party dog advisory welfare group heard from a wonderful organisation, Dogs on the Streets, which provides veterinary care and help to homeless people with pets. Can much more be done to provide accommodation that will not only take a homeless person off the street but allow them to keep their pet?

James Brokenshire: The hon. Lady makes a serious and important point. At an additional shelter that opened in Bristol, one of the first young men I spoke to had his dog with him. Indeed, I spoke to another homeless person last night who also had a dog, and the shelter that I visited accommodated rough sleepers and their dogs. If there are further lessons that we can learn and apply to ensure that good practice is reflected and recognised, we will do so, and I appreciate the hon. Lady making that point in the way she did.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Support services in Torbay do a strong job in reaching out to rough sleepers, but evidence suggests that too many end up back on the street at a later date—which is why we are considering adopting a Housing First approach, which we discussed yesterday with the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend...
the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler). What evidence has the Secretary of State seen emerge from the Government’s major pilots of Housing First, to see whether that will be effective?

James Brokenshire: We have seen international evidence that underlines the benefit of the Housing First model, which is why we are piloting it in three areas around the country. Those pilots are getting up and running, and I welcome the fact that in Birmingham the first homes are now being provided. I want to learn from that approach and ensure that we apply good practice and sustain people in their accommodation. We want to provide an opportunity to support and help people, and ensure that they turn their lives around.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): When pioneering Bristol journalist Michael Yong wrote an article in August about 50 homeless people who had died in Bristol over the previous five years, he was trying to humanise them and show that behind the statistics are real people with hopes and fears. Will the Secretary of State commit to understanding that this is a public health crisis that needs public health solutions, such as drug and alcohol counselling, mental health counselling, and many other aspects that have health causes at their root?

James Brokenshire: I recognise the health issues that the hon. Lady highlights, and I was pleased to visit Bristol a few weeks ago to see new provision that has been put in place. This is about providing support and opportunity, and once someone has taken up that help and got into accommodation, we must address and respond to their needs there. It is also about the prevention agenda, and I will continue to work with the Department of Health and Social Care to respond to the important points raised by the hon. Lady.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Secretary of State talk to colleagues across the Government about public institutions that release people on to the street? I recently had a case of someone who was released from a secure mental health institution on to the street, and he ended up in prison. Does the Secretary agree that it cannot be right for public institutions not to check where someone will live when they leave that institution?

James Brokenshire: I do, and the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017, which was championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is about that duty to refer, and the obligations on public bodies to consider the issues raised by homelessness. The hon. Gentleman highlights a point about custodial settings, and we have pilots in three prisons, supported by the Ministry of Justice, to ensure that someone who is released on a Friday evening when housing services are shut does not simply go out on the street. We must break that and stop it happening, and I take very seriously the point raised by the hon. Gentleman.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): As Liberal Democrat spokesperson for housing, I too send my condolences to the family and friends of the homeless man who died two nights ago. It is a tragedy that can leave no one in this House untouched and unconcerned.

One month ago in Bath I organised a homelessness conference with Julian House. Some excellent organisations took part, including my housing association, Curo, and the Albert Kennedy Trust, which do excellent work on homelessness. They all agree that at the bottom of the issue lies a chronic shortage of social housing. The Liberal Democrats are demanding the building of 100,000 new social homes every year—the current output is less than 10,000—to address that chronic shortage. When will the Government recognise that the private sector will not deliver the number of social houses that we need? A public sector has to deliver those houses. Social housing is a social project, and the Government need to put resources into it.

James Brokenshire: First and foremost, the issue is about individuals—a point made by the hon. Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) and other hon. Members. Secondly, there has been a lack of focus and attention on social housing for years, frankly. That is why we are investing through our affordable homes programme and, just as importantly, through the release of borrowing restrictions so that councils can build the next generation of council homes and increase the number of social and affordable homes, to meet need.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Ipswich Borough Council has provided an instant access homelessness hospital in Ipswich for many years, since before recent legislation; incidentally, it can also provide accommodation for homeless people’s dogs, which is fantastic. However, it cannot afford to provide 24-hour reception facilities or sufficient support for the most difficult people. When will the Government fund housing authorities sufficiently so that they can provide that support for the most difficult people? When will the right hon. Gentleman’s Department persuade county councils to stop cutting the support for citizens advice bureaux and other advice agencies that help to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place?

James Brokenshire: There are clear duties under the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017; obviously, we are carefully considering its implementation, with funding provided to support that activity. I commend the work taking place in Ipswich, which sounds as though it is making a real difference. I would ask the hon. Gentleman’s authority to work closely with our rough-sleeping team at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. We are seeking to provide advice; if there are challenges to meet, that can be done through that team.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): We should not accept a society where a man can die on the steps of Parliament because he does not have a roof over his head. Sadly, a man also died in Barnsley earlier this year. There will be 100 people without a home in my town this Christmas. The Secretary of State said that we had a moral duty to tackle the scandal. Will he commit to more funding for councils such as mine in Barnsley?

James Brokenshire: I do believe that there is a moral duty to act, which is why we have taken a number of steps, including the additional funding through the rough-sleeping initiative and the rough-sleeping strategy. Equally, there is the challenge of helping people to take
support and provision when it is there. Sadly, in a number of cases where we have seen deaths, support and accommodation has been offered but not taken up, sometimes because of some of the other issues and challenges. The hon. Lady certainly has my commitment to challenge this and take the agenda forward. Today’s figures are unacceptable, and I am determined to act further.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a boyish 50; according to the latest statistics, the average age of homeless males who died was 44. Will he reflect on the fact that, when he was in his early 40s, this issue had largely been solved and dealt with by Government action during the early 2000s? The current crisis is a product of a combination of complacency and austerity. If he is serious about resolving the situation, it will require more than just words; it will require getting the whole Government working together on the issue as a top priority.

James Brokenshire: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point: this is not just about my Department, but Departments across Whitehall. A ministerial group involving the key Departments meets and is focused on taking the action needed.

It is shocking that, according to today’s figures, the average age of someone dying on the streets or as a consequence of homelessness is 44—younger than the hon. Gentleman or I. That is stark: it underlines the chronic health issues that may be involved—drugs, alcohol and other issues, too—and the need for us to act.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers so far and his commitment to addressing homelessness. Some 8 million people are only one pay cheque away from losing their homes. Does he agree that we must recognise that being homeless does not involve only those who are unemployed or who have mental health issues? Some people may become homeless because of the removal of their overtime or a cut to their working hours. How does he intend to help those on the brink of homelessness?

James Brokenshire: I appreciate the situation in Northern Ireland and the support and accommodation available there. There are different pictures in different parts of our United Kingdom. Part of this is about ensuring we have a strong economy, creating jobs and growth and the prosperity agenda that sits behind all this, so we can and will look forward to the future positively. Equally, I come back to the point, particularly in relation to England and Wales, about longer tenancies and security in tenancies. That is why I am reflecting carefully on the consultation we carried out a few months back.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, 597 homeless people died on our streets. Just imagine: that is nearly one dead homeless person for every seat in this Chamber. One cold dead homeless person where I sit, where the Minister sits and where you sit, Mr Speaker. It happens not just in big cities, however. Henryk Smolarz died on the streets in Plymouth. Does the Minister think not just about the big cities, but the small cities, towns and rural areas where the combination of street homelessness and people living in insecure accommodation is as much a problem as in the big cities?

James Brokenshire: I do. I can certainly assure the hon. Gentleman on that. I talked about the 83 priority areas. That is based on last year’s count. We are obviously looking at other data, too, to ensure that our focus and attention is very firmly on areas of need. Where there is good practice that can be shared, we will absolutely do that. I am desperately saddened to hear of the particular case in Plymouth that he highlights. We will be working not just in the big cities, but across the country to provide support where it is needed.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I entirely endorse everything my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire) said about the need to treat this situation as a public health emergency. I also echo her praise for Michael Yong, the reporter from the Bristol Post. One issue that Michael has also been looking at is the quality of supported housing in the city, particularly in one property in my constituency that is clearly not fit for purpose. The Secretary of State visited the new homeless shelter in St Anne’s in my constituency, which I hope will do a great deal to help homeless people over the winter. May I urge him to look at regulating supported housing providers that are not doing such a good job, to make sure that people get the services they need?

James Brokenshire: I welcome the hon. Lady’s important point. I want to see appropriate support and provision being provided across the board. I think there is some good practice that we can point to, but there is also not good practice. Therefore, we need to take measures to ensure that people are being cared for. Ultimately, we are talking about some of the most vulnerable people we could point to. They lack confidence—putting aside all the other issues—and the ability to get help. I feel their vulnerability very keenly. We need to learn and to ensure that appropriate standards are in place. I am very happy to look into any further issues she may wish to raise in relation to her particular case in Bristol.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): On average, two people a week die while homeless in Scotland. The average life expectancy of a homeless person in Scotland is just 39. People sleeping on the streets in Scotland before they register as homeless is up 10% from 2016 to 2018. That shows the data picture is not clear. Under Labour, targeted action reduced rough sleeping by 75%. It is not an accident that homelessness has increased. It is because of a failure of policy in mental health, addictions, poverty, social security, housing and immigration. All those areas are failing, and as a result people are dying. If the Secretary of State is willing to address the fundamental failure of public policy, he has to turn to his Front-Bench colleagues and make them accept the reality of what austerity has done and the social destruction it is causing in every part of the United Kingdom. We have to get a grip on this in our national interest.

James Brokenshire: I recognise the need for concerted action across the board. When I look at the numbers, I see that we have not done enough and that we need to do more. That is what the rough-sleeping strategy is all about.
about and that is what a number of things I have spoken to the House about this morning are profoundly all about. I want rough sleeping to be a thing of the past. There are clear lessons that we can apply and learn from. I will continue to reflect on and review the data as it emerges. As I said, we have provided an initial £100 million for the rough-sleeping strategy. I intend to have annual reviews so that, where further steps and measures are needed, we can take action to ensure we are making a difference.

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): My question is about violent assaults on rough sleepers. I am sure that most Members—indeed, most right-minded people—have been horrified and felt revulsion at the recent attacks on people who are already in an extremely weak and vulnerable position and, in particular, at the fact that some of the perpetrators have filmed their attacks and circulated them on social media as though they were some perverted form of sport or entertainment. What further action can the Minister take on this front? Will he ensure, for instance, that the relevant statutory agencies have drawn up plans to identify the potential threat and to offer protection against it for vulnerable homeless people?

James Brokenshire: Such examples are utterly repugnant and will, I know, be absolutely condemned by everyone in the House. We are talking about some of the most vulnerable people who are out on the streets, and the fact that they can be preyed upon and the purpose is somehow to provide entertainment is disgusting. We are working with the Home Office, which is taking steps to bring together police and crime commissioners to deal with the policing aspects. We need to look at the issue on a number of fronts to ensure that action is taken. The rough-sleeping strategy refers to the number of assaults and the greater propensity to victimise those who are out on the streets. That is unacceptable, which is why we will continue to work with the Home Office.

Point of Order

11.41 am

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful to you for accepting it. I believe that it is my duty as a Back Bencher to hold the British Government to account, but that is only possible if the Government act with transparency. PricewaterhouseCoopers has written a report on HS2 that confirms that the line will cost taxpayers at least 25% more than similar schemes in other countries. The Department for Transport has refused to publish the report for two years, but, following a series of written parliamentary questions, I managed to secure confirmation that it would be published before the House rises for Christmas. We are still waiting for that report, Mr Speaker. Can you advise me and other Members how we can go about holding to account a Department that is intent on shirking scrutiny?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and for his characteristic courtesy in giving me notice of his intention to raise it.

I will start by making the obvious point that the House has not yet risen for Christmas, and the Government therefore have a few hours in which to deliver on their stated intention to publish the report before the recess. Meanwhile, the hon. Gentleman has made his concern very clear. It is on the record and will be visible to all in the Official Report, and it has been heard by those sitting on the Treasury Bench.

Beyond that, I would say to the hon. Gentleman—who is a perspicacious and indefatigable Member of the House—that he has the opportunity presented by the business question. I hope that he will not be beeting out of the Chamber too quickly, because he will have the chance to raise the matter with the Leader of the House if he so wishes. The incentive exists, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman is suitably enticed.
Business of the House

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I ask the Leader of the House for the business for next week?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom): The business for the week commencing Monday 7 January 2019 will be as follows:

Monday 7 January—The draft Tobacco Products and Nicotine Inhaling Products (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018, followed by a debate on the fifth report from the Committee on Standards, “Implications of the Dame Laura Cox report for the House’s standards system: Initial proposals”, followed by a general debate on children’s social care in England. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Tuesday 8 January—Remaining stages of the Finance (No. 3) Bill.


Thursday 10 January—Continuation of debate on section 13(1)(B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

Friday 11 January—Subject to the proceedings on the business motion, the House may meet to continue the debate on section 13(1)(B) of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

On the 36th and final business question of the year, I would like to pay particular tribute to Brendan Mulvihill, Les Stockwell and Noel Kirby, who all retire from the Commons this Christmas with a combined 120 years of service between them. It is that kind of knowledge and dedication that makes Parliament such a wonderful place for the rest of us to work, and their service is very much appreciated by all of us.

The online publication of “Erskine May” was such a popular early Christmas present last week that I am pleased to be able to come to the House with one last pre-recess Christmas offering: anyone looking for a last-minute Christmas gift for their colleagues will now find that the “MPs’ Guide to Procedure” has been published, and I recommend every colleague might like to pick up a copy, and we are grateful for the hard work of the House staff in producing this.

On the final business questions of 2018, I would like to pay tribute to, and wish a very merry Christmas to, all the staff of Parliament: from the doorkeepers and caterers to the cleaners and the clerks, you all deserve a very well-earned rest.

It has been a busy year in Parliament and I know there are challenging days and big decisions ahead of us—there is no denying that. I would like to say at such an important time for Parliament that I know that, despite our differences, every Member comes to this place to do right by their constituents and their country. We should always remember that what brings us together is stronger than what divides us, and I pay tribute to all colleagues across this House for their commitment. With that in mind, I wish all Members a very happy and restful Christmas and the very best for 2019.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for her business statement. It is a very interesting business statement, but before turning to it may I ask this question of the Leader of the House? She confirmed in reply to me on the draft Markets in Financial Instruments (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 that if a “reasonable request” was made for a debate, she would allow it. I thought I had made a reasonable request last week, but it appears to have been pushed through without a debate in a deferred Division. I also ask her to look at the question of statutory instruments. This issue was raised by the shadow Chancellor, who says that sometimes statutory instruments do not seem to have a named Minister. I am not sure that that is the correct way to proceed as there are wide-ranging powers. Will the Leader of the House look at the statutory instruments, so that we do not have a “To whom it may concern” on them?

I also asked about the draft Universal Credit (Managed Migration) Regulations 2018. Given that the new Secretary of State said yesterday when speaking to the Select Committee on Work and Pensions that she was not going to follow the prescribed time limit, may I ask that the Government withdraw this now, pending the results of the pilot scheme, to stop the full impact?

And where is the NHS 10-year plan? The Prime Minister did not answer that question yesterday in response to the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

Turning to the business, we have a debate on Wednesday, on Thursday and possibly on Friday. It cannot have been difficult to give us the following week’s business, too. I can do it: Monday 14 January, continuation of the debate on the European Union withdrawal Act; Tuesday 15 January, debate on the European withdrawal Act, and the meaningful vote. The Prime Minister said in her statement this week:

“I can confirm today that we intend to return to the meaningful vote debate in the week commencing 7 January and hold the vote the following week.”—[Official Report, 17 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 528.]

I hope she is true to her word and we do not have to rely on lip-readers. I ask the Leader of the House if this will be a new motion on a new deal or the old deal with an explanatory note. Do those hon. and right hon. Members who have already spoken get to speak again, and do those who did not speak before get to speak first now?

The Prime Minister pulled the meaningful vote, saying she had heard from hon. Members, but she had not because there were still two days of debate left—and former Ministers were among those waiting to speak—so let’s say that unicorn. She had not heard from the House in a vote: it was just what the Government thought the House was going to do. I had not realised that the Government had additional powers of telepathy; I wonder if that is in “Erskine May”. I know the Prime Minister wants the Opposition to help her with her deal, so let’s say that unicorn. The Prime Minister went to the EU with her red lines and her negotiating position. She cannot expect hon. Members now to come to her aid when she did not even consult us on her red lines in the first place. We in the Opposition were gagged.

What do businesses say? A Bristol-based online retailer said that, unless there is a Christmas Brexit miracle, he will move part of his business to Germany in January because of impending tariffs. The Institute of Directors said that business leaders were “tearing their hair out” at the current state of negotiations, and that “the last thing businesses needed today was more uncertainty”. 
The British Chambers of Commerce called on politicians to “redouble efforts” to stop a no-deal Brexit. The Cabinet is split on a managed no-deal and, it seems, on a second referendum.

I have a Christmas quiz, so fingers on buzzers. Who said this?

“The Conservative Party is suffering something like a nervous breakdown. To watch the Tories in the Commons is to watch a group that has lost much of its self-discipline. Members openly insult each other, the leader has only just survived a vote of confidence, and the pro-Brexit European Research Group of backbenchers appears to have its own whipping system and policy platform”?

No, it was not the Leader of the Opposition, but Lord Finkelstein, writing yesterday in The Times.

Yesterday the Prime Minister was like a pantomime dame. The Government are like “Whacky Races”, or perhaps the spin-off, “The Perils of Penelope Pitstop”, with the Prime Minister as Penelope Pitstop, stopping off at EU capitals and being pursued by the Ant Hill Mob—the no-dealers, chasing unicorns. The Prime Minister has phoned all her friends and taken away all the answers, right and wrong, by pulling the vote, and she has failed to ask the audience. Can the Leader of the House guarantee that there will be a vote in the week commencing 14 January, just as the Prime Minister has stated in Parliament?

I too welcome the new procedure guide—many Members will have been accosted by the Chairman of Ways and Means as he handed them out in Portcullis House. I want to mention the colleagues who worked so hard on it, particularly Joanna Dodds. Thank you to Joanna and all her colleagues.

I want to thank you, Mr Speaker, and everyone who works in your office for all their support—they are the epitome of grace under pressure. I also thank the Deputy Speakers and all the House staff. Let us remember that it is the Clerk’s last Christmas in post. I thank the Serjeant at Arms; Phil and his team of doorkeepers; the House of Commons Library; the official reporters; the catering and cleaning staff; the postal workers; the police officers who provide additional security and back-up for the doorkeepers; and all the security officers on the estate.

We too sadly say goodbye and good luck to our three extremely experienced House staff who are leaving in January. Brendan Mulvihill has been with the House Service for 36 years, as head office keeper and head of service delivery. Les Stockwell is a service delivery manager with 42 years of experience. Noel Kirby has 41 years as a service delivery manager. Together, they have supported the House through 10 general elections. Les, you have been very helpful to me personally. I hope that they will all come back and see the House that they built, passing on their advice and support of this unique place, helping us to do our work for our constituents, understanding that this is a workplace, not just a visitor attraction.

I also want to mention MP4 and their latest release, which is quite significant because all the money raised goes to the charity Crisis. I also thank the Opposition Chief Whip and his office, and of course my staff. I wish all right hon. and hon. Members a peaceful Christmas and all good wishes for 2019.

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her many different points, and for her good wishes to the House. She raised a number of points on statutory instruments, and I have heard her request clearly. She will know that the Government have a good record in responding to reasonable requests from the Opposition for time for debates on the Floor of the House. We will continue to discuss such requests through the usual channels.

The hon. Lady made a point about designated Ministers with responsibility for statutory instruments, but I am not entirely sure that I caught it, so I will have to look it up in Hansard and write to her. To update the House, though, more than 290 Brexit statutory instruments have now been laid for Parliament to scrutinise, and very good progress is being made. We continue to provide as smooth a flow as possible for the sifting Committees in this House and the other place. We are quite clear that we have enough time to get all those urgent Brexit statutory instruments through. I hope that that reassures the House. The hon. Lady asked specifically about the universal credit statutory instrument; I shall take that away and take it up with the Secretary of State on her behalf.

The hon. Lady asked where the NHS 10-year plan is. She will be aware that our long-term plan for the NHS will see funding grow by £394 million more a week in real terms by 2023-24. That is the biggest investment in our NHS ever committed by a Government, and it is great news for the NHS. The NHS itself is writing its long-term plan for how it will use that money to provide a better service for patients, and we look forward to seeing that as soon as it is available.

The hon. Lady asked about the second week back after the Christmas recess. The business of the House will of course be subject to the motion, which will be put to the House on 9 January. There will then be the opportunity for the House to agree the business. She asked whether there will be a new motion; that will of course be subject to what the Prime Minister comes back with. As she has made clear, she is seeking legal reassurances on the issues around the backstop. Whether MPs will speak twice in the debate is a matter for you, Mr Speaker. It is matter for the Chair as to who speaks in debates.

Let me be clear: the hon. Lady suggested that the Prime Minister has not spoken to the Opposition, but she very much has. Throughout this Parliament the Government have been seeking to speak to Opposition Members closely and collaboratively about their concerns about the Brexit preparations. There were more than 280 hours of debate in the Chambers on the European Union (Withdrawal) Act, and it took more than 11 months for that Bill to go through Parliament. The hon. Lady will appreciate that there is a huge amount of consultation, and the Prime Minister is seeking to provide reassurance. If the hon. Lady wants uncertainty to be gone, she and her right hon. and hon. colleagues must take seriously the proposal that the Prime Minister will put before the House and seriously consider voting for it. That is the way to get rid of uncertainty for the country.

Finally, I should point out to the hon. Lady that Penelope Pitstop always wins through in the end. All the rotters and cads around her get defeated and she always wins.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend should recall that Penelope Pitstop was opposed by a man called Dick Dastardly, who was completely incompetent and lost out every time.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend should recall that Penelope Pitstop was opposed by a man called Dick Dastardly, who was completely incompetent and lost out every time.
May I draw my right hon. Friend’s attention to an issue of significant importance? I am a sponsor of Lord McColl’s Bill on improvements to modern-day slavery legislation. I recognise that it will never see the light of day in this Chamber, but will my right hon. Friend use her good offices to speak to her right hon. Friends in the Home Office and recognise that this great thing that the Conservative party introduced—this was the first Parliament in the world to introduce a modern slavery Bill, and we did that to help to release those people suffering—now needs serious adjustments to ensure that those who suffer persecution can be protected by being allowed longer stays in this country? I urge her to use her good offices to persuade the Home Office to extend that time, or to schedule a debate in the House on a possible extension to the time for which victims of modern slavery may stay in the UK. Otherwise, they risk being retrafficked, and we would never forgive ourselves if that happened.

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises an incredibly important point. All of us in this House are proud of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, which the Prime Minister passed when she was Home Secretary. It is vital that we keep ahead of problems. It is extraordinary and utterly unacceptable that slavery still exists to this day. The Government have done a lot to protect against violence against women and girls. Through the 2015 Act, we will continue to review any steps that need to be taken to improve on the work that has already gone ahead.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next year? As we remember particular issues, it is worth while noting that tomorrow marks the 30th anniversary of the Lockerbie tragedy, the biggest single act of terrorism perpetrated on British soil.

Well, there does not seem to be much sign of Christmas cheer in this place, does there? Yesterday, the House practically descended into a grotesque pantomime of “He says, she says”. The sight of the party of Government reduced to nothing other than a furious mob was as bizarre as it was unedifying. The scenes from yesterday were simply appalling, and constituents have got in touch to say just how embarrassed they felt about how this place conducted itself. As Rome was burning, we were deciphering what the Leader of the Opposition muttered under his breath with speech analysts. For the Leader of the House to raise the temperature in the way she did yesterday was simply irresponsible. She is the Leader of the House and she should be lowering the temperature, not lighting the touch paper. In this place, our favourite Christmas film is not “It’s a Wonderful Life”—it is “Hate Actually”.

As we leave today, we leave this country on the very brink. Not only have we arrived at the cliff edge, but the front wheels are starting to topple over. And from us it is nothing other than a customary, “Merry Christmas, British people, see you in 17 days”, as they look on with bemused Brexmas horror. But what happens when we get back? The Leader of the House has to make this clear today: do we have a resumption or a new debate when we come back to the meaningful vote? Will all the previous amendments, particularly the one tabled by the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), still stand? I know that she now personally favours the chaos of a no deal, but the rest of the country do not and she will not get past this House. When I asked her the last time, a few weeks ago—she will remember her response to me—whether the meaningful vote definitely, without condition, would go ahead, she said it most definitely would. So I ask her today, once again: will this meaningful vote definitely happen at the time specified by the Prime Minister, yes or no? We will not accept any other attempts to remove this.

Lastly, Mr Speaker, may I wish you all the very best for this Christmas? I hope you have time to get yourself a peaceful Christmas. Of course, I want to extend that to the staff in this House, who I believe will be glad to be shot of the lot of us for a couple of weeks. I am sure they are going to enjoy being clear of Members of Parliament bothering them. Mr Speaker, 2018 was Brexit crisis year, and it is almost unbelievable to think that 2019 could be so much worse. So to everybody across this House, let me say: enjoy your Christmas and, more importantly, enjoy it while you still can.

Andrea Leadsom: I would not dream of calling the hon. Gentleman a bit of a Grinch, because that might be unparliamentary language, Mr Speaker. First, I wish to join him in paying tribute, in memoriam, to those who suffered from that appalling, horrific incident in Lockerbie 30 years ago. Many will never get over it and our hearts go out to them at this time.

The hon. Gentleman and I worked very hard on the complaints procedure and on the culture change in this place, seeking to treat everybody who works here and comes here with dignity and respect. So I simply do not accept his accusation that what happened yesterday was trivial. It is very important that we in this Chamber do act as if we know how to behave. We need to be a role model if we are to succeed in changing the culture of this place.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the meaningful vote debate. As he knows, it will be coming back on the first week back. There will be a business of the House motion on 9 January, so the House will decide exactly the terms on which and for how long that motion is. I understand that, because of the nature of the business,
the Backbench Business Committee will not get any time in the first week back after the Christmas and New Year recess, but I hope that we will get some time early in the new year. Yesterday’s almost unprecedented events meant that one of our debates had to be postponed. It was an important debate on mental health first aid in the workplace. As a result of the two Government statements and the almost unprecedented number of points of order, the debate had to be—[HON. MEMBERS: “And an emergency debate.”] I am sorry. I try to resist heckling because of my position, Madam Deputy Speaker, but don’t worry; I will roll with the punches.

That said, I am glad to see that this afternoon we have a healthy amount of time for the important debate on the Rohingya refugee crisis, and of course we must not forget that our pre-Adjournment debate on matters to be raised before the Adjournment will take place in Westminster Hall at 1.30 pm. Members not taking part in the Rohingya debate will be very welcome to come along.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you, Mr Speaker and the Leader of the House a happy, peaceful and restful Christmas. I also wish all our constituents a happy, peaceful and restful, but also warm and comfortable, Christmas. They deserve it.

**Andrea Leadsom:** First, may I say it is such a pleasure to work with the hon. Gentleman? He sets a fine example of how to chair a Committee in this House. It is always a great pleasure. I would point out to him that on Monday 7 January there will in fact be a Backbench Business Committee debate on children’s social care in England—that is in the first week back—but I appreciate he has a long list of requests from Back Benchers, and I always seek to accommodate them.

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): This winter, notwithstanding extra investment, health services will struggle with extra patients and crowded schools with extra pupils, and our roads are more and more congested. At the heart of this is the level of population growth. The population is growing faster than at any time for almost a century, at a rate of 400,000 a year. Will the Leader of the House allow a debate on that subject? Much of the growth is due to immigration—not all, but much—which of course is at record levels. Such a debate would allow us to explore what Chesterton said: “The way to love anything is to realise that it might be lost”. With our green and pleasant land concreted over, our public services buckling under the pressure and civil society under strain, all that we cherish might be lost unless we act now.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I thought for one awful moment my right hon. Friend was going to say that I personally needed to do something about the population explosion, and I was scrabbling around to think what I could do. He is absolutely right to point out the need to keep the balance between building enough houses, which is a top priority for all right hon. and hon. Members—we all want to see people suitably housed—and preserving this green and pleasant land we live in. I completely understand where he is coming from. Under the Immigration Bill, which is shortly to be debated, and of course the meaningful vote debate, there will be plenty of opportunities to discuss the specific issue of how the growing population can best be served.

**Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Moving away from the Brexit issue, can we have an early debate on the situation in Syria and the fight against Daesh, given the statement by the US President, the fact that the US is going to withdraw its forces from the region and hand over to the Russians, the Iranians and Turkey, and that the French Government have made it clear they will remain engaged in Syria? Can we have an early debate or statement explaining what our Government’s position on the situation is?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this very concerning issue. We do remain committed to securing peace in Syria and fully support the UN-led Geneva process. Securing the lasting defeat of Daesh is a top priority for the Government. The Foreign Secretary made a written statement yesterday explaining that Daesh is being defeated militarily. It is estimated by the global coalition that Daesh has lost over 99% of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria.

At the same time, it is vital that the UK remains at the forefront of the international humanitarian response. I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the UK has committed over £2.7 billion to Syria since the start of the conflict, which is our biggest ever response to a humanitarian crisis. He will be aware that we have Defence questions on 14 January and he may want to raise this issue then.

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): I join with others in thanking Les, Noel and Brendon for their years of service to this House.

Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on the criteria for awarding city status? Recently, the area that I represent was voted the happiest place in the country, and possibly in the world, so I think it would be excellent if happiness could be added to the criteria.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish everyone a happy Christmas.

**Andrea Leadsom:** My hon. Friend seems to make his constituency gaining city status a feature of his pre-recess bids. Having visited it recently with him, I have to say that it is a very happy place, but perhaps that is because he represents it so well. He will be aware that the criteria used to judge applications are determined once a city status competition has been called. The Government do not, I am afraid, have plans at present for a city status competition. However, I urge him to make representations to the Cabinet Office for the next time.

**Luciana Berger** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): May I extend my Christmas and happy new year wishes to the whole House?

On a very serious matter, the Leader of the House will be aware that yesterday there was a report in *The Times* about a leaked document from the Department for Work and Pensions that outlines different planning for Brexit scenarios. In particular, on a no-deal Brexit, the document warns of increased poverty, increased homelessness and a potential £12 billion cost to our country in increased unemployment costs. I note that we have seen online that the Government overnight—in the past 24 hours—have quietly edited every no-deal technical notice to take out the word “unlikely” from the sentence, “in the unlikely event of no deal”.

- **Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Moving away from the Brexit issue, can we have an early debate on the situation in Syria and the fight against Daesh, given the statement by the US President, the fact that the US is going to withdraw its forces from the region and hand over to the Russians, the Iranians and Turkey, and that the French Government have made it clear they will remain engaged in Syria? Can we have an early debate or statement explaining what our Government’s position on the situation is?

- **Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this very concerning issue. We do remain committed to securing peace in Syria and fully support the UN-led Geneva process. Securing the lasting defeat of Daesh is a top priority for the Government. The Foreign Secretary made a written statement yesterday explaining that Daesh is being defeated militarily. It is estimated by the global coalition that Daesh has lost over 99% of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria.

- **Mike Gapes** (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): Moving away from the Brexit issue, can we have an early debate on the situation in Syria and the fight against Daesh, given the statement by the US President, the fact that the US is going to withdraw its forces from the region and hand over to the Russians, the Iranians and Turkey, and that the French Government have made it clear they will remain engaged in Syria? Can we have an early debate or statement explaining what our Government’s position on the situation is?

- **Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this very concerning issue. We do remain committed to securing peace in Syria and fully support the UN-led Geneva process. Securing the lasting defeat of Daesh is a top priority for the Government. The Foreign Secretary made a written statement yesterday explaining that Daesh is being defeated militarily. It is estimated by the global coalition that Daesh has lost over 99% of the territory it once controlled in Iraq and Syria.
This is a very serious situation. In her opening remarks, the Leader of the House talked about the need for reducing uncertainty and for us all therefore to vote in support of the withdrawal agreement. We are not going to get the chance to do that at the very least—if it goes ahead—for 24 days. Why is she not bringing the House back at the very least on 2 January, when most of the country goes back to work, to contend with the uncertainty that is causing a crisis in the country?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raised the issue of a leaked document and she will be aware that we do not comment on leaked documents. At the same time, she will also be aware that any competent Government must always plan for all eventualities. That is not to predict that those are going to happen, but to ensure that we are never caught out by circumstances beyond our control. The Government will prepare for all eventualities and it is right that we do so.

The hon. Lady asked about bringing back the meaningful vote. As has been explained by the Prime Minister in the many statements she has made to this House, she has listened very carefully to the beginning of the debate on the meaningful vote and to the representations made right across the House about the grave concerns, particularly in regard to the backstop. The Prime Minister is determined to get the legal reassurances that hon. and right hon. Members want to see, and we will return with that vote once we are more confident that the House will support it. That is what will deliver the country from the uncertainty and that is what the Prime Minister is committed to achieving.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): We cannot fail to notice that the high street has been on its knees. Indeed, many shops and pubs have been closing. I know there was a business rate relief of £5,000 in the Chancellor’s Budget. However, in a high house and property value area such as mine, £5,000 really is not helping at all. May we have an urgent debate on what more we can do to recognise that there is a cliff edge for very many businesses in prosperous areas and they get no relief whatsoever from the Chancellor’s business rate relief? Please may we debate as a matter of urgency why we should have not a cliff edge, but an escalator to encourage businesses to survive?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. We know that the high street is changing and that more people are using online shopping routes. On the other hand, we also know that Britain’s retailers support over 3 million jobs and contribute over £90 billion to our economy, so it is absolutely right that we do everything we can to support them. She observed that we are cutting business rates, but pointed out that that has not helped in her own constituency. I would say to her that the Government and retailers come together through our Retail Sector Council. I encourage her to raise this in the Finance Bill debate on the second day back from recess, when she can discuss directly with Treasury Ministers what more can be done.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate in which I am sure she, the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and, indeed, the Prime Minister would like to take part in order to set out their different or respective views on where next for Brexit? Such a debate would highlight the rather clueless, rudderless, fractured nature of our Government’s position on Brexit. By this means, I am absolutely certain, causing the Leader of the Opposition with immediate effect to sign the cross-party motion tabled by the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Green party and the Liberal Democrats—early-day motion 1943, the motion of no confidence in the Government—which I am sure the Leader of the House would want to make time available for us to debate.

Andrea Leadsom: I am not quite sure what the question was, but let me just say that the Government’s policy is absolutely clear: we will be leaving the European Union on 29 March 2019. The Prime Minister is working very hard on getting the changes that can secure the confidence of the House in her proposal, which will give certainty to businesses, travellers and people right across the United Kingdom about our future as we leave the European Union.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Last weekend, students from North London Collegiate School raised a whacking £50,000 towards the National Brain Appeal’s immunotherapy fund to combat brain cancer. Very sadly, the former headteacher of the school, who was the headteacher for 20 years, was recently diagnosed with brain cancer, but that treatment is not available on the national health service. When we come back, may we have a debate in Government time on what measures can be taken to ensure that the national health service funds this all-important treatment for the people who are suffering?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend raises a very serious and important issue. I am sure that brings back to all of us the memory of our friend Baroness Jowell, who tragically died as the result of brain cancer. It is a very serious issue, and I am sure some of the measures on particular treatments will be brought forward in the NHS 10-year plan. However, I encourage my hon. Friend to raise it directly with Ministers at the next Health and Social Care questions.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I am still not quite clear from what the Leader of the House has said why we cannot have a date for a final vote on the EU issue. She has announced Friday 11 January, but not the following day and for the remainder of that week. That aside, may we have a debate urgently on the question of retail crime? Many shop workers face an increasing number of attacks over the Christmas period, and we need to put some protections in place. We have seen an increase in retail crime, with the cost of shoplifting offences rising to £700 million. It is an important issue, so may we have an urgent debate on that as well as an answer on the European question?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made a statement on Monday, her sixth in 19 sitting days, in which she confirmed that we intend to return to the meaningful vote debate in the week commencing on 7 January and to hold the vote the following week, which is the week commencing on 14 January. Further details will be set out in the business of the House motion, which, as I have confirmed in today’s business statement, will be considered on Wednesday 9 January, before we continue the debate on the deal that day and for the remainder of that week.
On the right hon. Gentleman’s other point, I understand that the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), has offered to meet him to discuss his particular concerns. If he has any problem with that meeting and he would like me to take the issue up directly with her, I would be delighted to do so.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): May we have time for a debate on compelling heavy goods vehicles to use commercial sat-navs to stop them using rural roads as cut-throughs, which is affecting the villages of Alfriston, Ditchling and Newick in my constituency? Commercial sat-navs would enable enforcement action to be taken against those who flout the height and weight restrictions, and it would make our rural roads safer for all road users.

Andrea Leadsom: I think my hon. Friend will find a lot of support for that from around the Chamber. In my constituency we have enormous problems with HGVs getting stuck together when they are trying to pass on a narrow country road. She will be aware that we have Transport questions in our first week back, on 10 January, and I encourage her to raise the issue directly with Ministers then.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): This morning on Radio 4, speaking about the prospect of a managed event votes don’t take place”. Why?

Andrea Leadsom: What I meant was, in the event that such a vote was not passed by the House. Just to be clear, the vote will take place, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings for the action they oversaw to ensure that the public are not put at risk and that perpetrators? And, I believe, taken further. May we have another debate on drones and aviation safety, which is affecting the villages of Alfriston, Ditchling and Newick in my constituency? Commercial sat-navs would enable enforcement action to be taken against those who flout the height and weight restrictions, and it would make our rural roads safer for all road users.

Andrea Leadsom: I think my hon. Friend will find a lot of support for that from around the Chamber. In my constituency we have enormous problems with HGVs getting stuck together when they are trying to pass on a narrow country road. She will be aware that we have Transport questions in our first week back, on 10 January, and I encourage her to raise the issue directly with Ministers then.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): In July last year, I held a Westminster Hall debate on drones and aviation. In his excellent reply, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) promised certain measures, which came into effect in July this year. Certain others will come into effect next year. The crisis at Gatwick airport at the moment shows just how important those measures are, and how they have to be enforced and, I believe, taken further. May we have another debate on drones and aviation safety, to ensure that the public are not put at risk and that passengers are not deprived of their holidays, their honeymoons and their visits to loved ones by the entirely irresponsible, and indeed criminal, actions of these perpetrators?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings for the action they oversaw to ensure that the Government brought forward legislation to make it a criminal offence carrying a sentence of up to five years and unlimited fines to interfere with an aeroplane using a drone. That was absolutely essential. Our hearts go out to all those who are desperately trying to go on holiday or arrive in the United Kingdom via Gatwick at the moment. What is happening is absolutely unacceptable. I know that the police are doing everything they can to catch the operators of those drones. My hon. Friend has made an extremely good point, and I encourage him to raise it at Transport questions on Thursday 10 January.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): May we have a statement on Government procurement? The Health Secretary says that he is the world’s biggest buyer of fridges, which he is buying for medicines in preparation for a no-deal Brexit. Can the Leader of the House tell us exactly how many fridges the Government are going to be purchasing?

Andrea Leadsom: It might surprise the hon. Gentleman to learn that I cannot tell him exactly how many fridges—or indeed any other specific items he might like to raise—are involved. Had he given me prior notice of his question, I might have had a stab at it. The Government are ensuring that we are prepared for all eventualities, as any competent Government should do.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker. Emergency debates, extended exchanges on points of order and overrunning Question Times have contributed to the public’s perception that we are all overly fixated on Brexit. The Leader of the House will be aware of Standing Order No. 21, which requires that questions are not taken any later than one hour after the beginning of the House’s proceedings. Will she arrange for a statement, and perhaps even a debate, on the importance of that Standing Order being enforced, so that we can maximise the time available for other business, rather than being fixed by questions on Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We have had quite a number of challenges to business as a result of emergency debates being brought forward. This is certainly something that I always keep an eye on, but I would encourage him to raise this matter in the first place with the Chair of the Procedure Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker), to see whether it is something that his Committee would like to consider further.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): May we have a debate on the privatisation of the Forensic Science Service, following the scandal of 10,500 criminal cases that could have been affected by result-tampering at the private firm Randox Testing Services, based in Manchester, which the police have described as the worst evidence breach in living memory?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady raises an important point. It was quite a shock to see that report, and I think that all hon. Members will have been concerned about it. She is absolutely right to raise the matter, and she might like to seek an Adjournment debate so that she can get an answer directly from Ministers.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Leader of the House’s announcement that we will have a chance to debate the conclusions of Dame Laura Cox’s review on the first day back after the recess. Given what we have seen this week, could she arrange through the usual channels for one of the Deputy Speakers—either you, Madam Deputy Speaker, or the right hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dame Eleanor Laing)—to be in the Chair for that debate, to show exactly how culture change will be driven in this House?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his advice and suggestion. I think I am right in saying that it is a matter for the Chair as to who sits in
the Chair, but he has placed his views on record and I am sure that they will be listened to carefully.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I wish you and everyone else a very merry Christmas, Madam Deputy Speaker.

On a more sombre note, my constituent Cole Thomson, aged six, has repeated paralysing epileptic seizures, and his mother Lisa has been battling for access to medicinal cannabis to try to save his life. She states:

“A few weeks ago, Cole was running around kicking a ball. Now he can barely lift his foot. I still can’t believe how quickly he has deteriorated. This is a horrible nightmare I can’t wake up from every night and morning, watching my poor boy suffer.”

I have already written to the Home Secretary and to Scotland’s chief medical officer for guidance on the new regulations, but I have had no response yet. Will the Leader of the House ask her colleague to give me an urgent response or to provide an early statement on how we can do everything possible to access medicinal cannabis for Cole in order to save his life?

Andrea Leadsom: I am so sorry to hear about Cole’s problems, and I wish him and his family well, particularly at this time of year. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise his case in the Chamber, and if she would like to, I can take it up on her behalf and seek the answer that she is looking for.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Please may we have a statement on whether the House of Commons rules of behaviour have been highlighted not only to new colleagues but to all colleagues? I personally have found them very helpful, although I do not always get everything right, as you have highlighted a few times, Madam Deputy Speaker. Yesterday’s shenanigans in the Chamber highlighted the fact that some of our longer-standing colleagues also need to be reminded of the etiquette of this place. May we go into the new year with a whole new tone in this place so that we can conduct ourselves with the dignity expected of us, particularly as we bring forward the very difficult Brexit procedures?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. As she knows, many hon. and right hon. Members across the Chamber have worked very hard on culture change, on bringing forward a complaints procedure and on setting out a behaviour code for how people should treat each other, wherever they work in the Palace of Westminster or in our constituency offices. I hope that we will start to see the fruits of all that effort during 2019.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): We will need some more time in the new year to debate Yemen. We had the statement yesterday, in which the Foreign Secretary helpfully responded to my question about my constituent Jackie Saleh Morgan, whose daughter Safia was kidnapped from Cardiff in the 1980s. He said that “we will do everything we can to support his constituent and their family in the way that he wants.”—[Official Report, 19 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 840.] The way I want them to be supported is, when she and her family get out of the country, through getting personal British consular support in Cairo to get their British passports and to get back home to their family in Cardiff. Will the Leader of the House pass that message on to the Foreign Secretary before Christmas, and tell Ministers and officials that that is what we want?

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his commitment to looking after the interests of his constituent. He will appreciate that we are now hopeful that, for the first time since the start of the conflict, there might be a window in which both sides can be encouraged to stop the killing and start negotiating, which is absolutely vital. He will also appreciate that the Foreign Secretary has shown a huge amount of personal commitment to this issue. If he wants to write to me following business questions, I will be happy to pass his message on.

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): Happy Christmas to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

May we have a debate on the timeliness of business in this House? My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) has already raised the issue of the proliferation of SO24 debates and urgent questions, but there is a big problem about question times not starting and ending when they are supposed to. Questions to the Prime Minister now last between 45 minutes and an hour. As a new Member of this House, I find it very strange that the timetabling in this House is so very, very fluid, that meetings are disrupted and that constituents are put out by the fact that things do not happen when they should. May we have a debate on putting down clear times for things to start and stop?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for following business questions, I will be happy to pass his message on.

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Further to the questions raised by my hon. Friends the Members for Wells (James Heappey) and for Harborough (Neil O’Brien),
I wonder whether my right hon. Friend agrees that we lost a very important debate on mental health first aid last night because of an SO24 debate, which was apparently very popular, but which then in fact ran short because there were not that many people who wanted to speak in it. Does she agree that the Procedure Committee should specifically look at whether the SO24 procedure is functioning as it was intended and indeed in the interests of our constituents?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I certainly share my hon. Friend’s concern. I encourage all those who have questions about how some of the procedures in this place work to raise them with members of the Procedure Committee, who may be willing to take them up further and look into them.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all the staff of the House a very merry Christmas and a happy new year.

This question has been raised already, but I would like some clarity from the Leader of the House. Many of my constituents are currently stuck at Gatwick because of the flying of illegal drones in the airspace. Can we have an urgent debate or statement from the Government on the regulation of drones, particularly around airspace, and the criminal sanctions that go along with illegally flying drones, which could endanger many hundreds of lives? I say that particularly as this is the anniversary of the disaster at Lockerbie 30 years ago. Will she join me in congratulating London North Eastern Railway, a train company in public ownership, which is offering my constituents free travel back to Edinburgh today if they are caught up at Gatwick?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman’s local train company is offering a solution. It is awful for passengers who are stuck, or trying to get on or off a plane or to land at Gatwick. It is absolutely unacceptable. The Government passed legislation very swiftly to introduce a criminal sanction for those who seek to interfere with a plane using a drone. There are now sentences of up to five years and unlimited fines to interfere with a plane using a drone. There are now sentences of up to five years and unlimited fines for such activities. He is absolutely right to point out that we need to do more. A consultation is under way, for such activities. He is absolutely right to point out now sentences of up to five years and unlimited fines seeking to interfere with a plane using a drone. There are swift to introduce a criminal sanction for those who unacceptable. The Government passed legislation very on or off a plane or to land at Gatwick. It is absolutely awful for passengers who are stuck, or trying to get Gentleman’s local train company is offering a solution. It is awful for passengers who are stuck, or trying to get on or off a plane or to land at Gatwick. It is absolutely unacceptable. The Government passed legislation very swiftly to introduce a criminal sanction for those who seek to interfere with a plane using a drone. There are now sentences of up to five years and unlimited fines for such activities. He is absolutely right to point out that we need to do more. A consultation is under way, for such activities. He is absolutely right to point out now sentences of up to five years and unlimited fines seeking to interfere with a plane using a drone. There are swiftly to introduce a criminal sanction for those who seek to interfere with a plane using a drone.

**Andrea Leadsom:** I am pleased to hear that the hon. Gentleman’s local train company is offering a solution. It is awful for passengers who are stuck, or trying to get on or off a plane or to land at Gatwick. It is absolutely unacceptable. The Government passed legislation very swiftly to introduce a criminal sanction for those who seek to interfere with a plane using a drone. There are now sentences of up to five years and unlimited fines for such activities. He is absolutely right to point out that we need to do more. A consultation is under way, for such activities. He is absolutely right to point out now sentences of up to five years and unlimited fines seeking to interfere with a plane using a drone. There are swiftly to introduce a criminal sanction for those who seek to interfere with a plane using a drone.

**Jonathan Edwards** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The Leader of the House will have heard my point of order in relation to the PricewaterhouseCooper’s report on the costings of HS2. Can she arrange for me to have an early Christmas present and ensure that the promises made to me in answer to a written parliamentary question 188155 are honoured?

**Andrea Leadsom:** I did hear the hon. Gentleman’s point of order. He will no doubt be aware that many of my constituents would agree with his concerns. I will certainly look at what can be done and whether we can provide a debate.

**Mary Glindon** (North Tyneside) (Lab): Following the launch of its alcohol charter, the drugs, alcohol and justice cross-party parliamentary group, which I co-chair, wrote to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), seeking a meeting with her—

[Interruption.] The Minister has just taken her place in the Chamber. It has been several months. Can the Leader of the House have a kindly word with her, reminding her of the group’s request?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Lady’s timing was perfect. I can tell her that my hon. Friend is saying that she did not know anything about it and that she would be delighted to meet her.

**Andrea Leadsom:** Yes, the hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Specifically, the Standards Committee has brought forward its own review of what steps can be urgently taken to provide more lay member input on things such as voting and assessing any findings against Members of this place. Those are its initial suggestions of steps that we can urgently take. There will be a motion—I am just reviewing it now. Specifically, I am keen to make sure that the complainants’ confidentiality, which was such a core point of all the work that we did in the original setting up of the complaints procedure, is upheld. There will be a votable motion. It will change the Standing Orders of this House in certain small ways, but the Standards Committee is clear that there is more work to do. There will also be the six-month review of the complaints procedure itself, which will begin in late January. I will be talking to the House more about that in due course.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): In the early hours of Sunday 9 December, just two weeks ago, Chinese authorities launched a large-scale crackdown on a church in Sichuan province, arresting some 100 members as they worshipped their God. Twelve members of that church are still in detention, including the pastor, Wang Yi, and his wife. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement, or a debate, on this very pressing issue?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman raises a very serious issue about the rights of everyone to be able to freely practise their religion. He often raises such issues and he is absolutely right to do so. This whole House deplores any type of discrimination against anyone for their religious views. I encourage him to seek an Adjournment debate so that he can raise the matter directly with Ministers.
Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and all the staff a happy Christmas.

I have tabled a written question about the Civil Nuclear Constabulary’s pension predicament. It has been awaiting an equality impact assessment that was undertaken by the Treasury and then passed to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. In its answer, BEIS tells me that it cannot release it yet until all policy discussions on this matter are complete. May we have a statement on why we are awaiting policy decisions when the request was for the publication of the impact assessment?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that I have not had sight of his question, so I am not aware of exactly what the position is. We have BEIS questions on Tuesday 8 January; I encourage him to raise it directly with Ministers then.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): There are many people in the House, across the parties, and outside who have real concerns around some elements of policing across the United Kingdom, which has seen crime going up, including burglary, knife crime and much more. I have tabled early-day motion 1656, signed by 47 cross-party Members, demanding that the Government implement a police royal commission, the first one for 50 years, so that the whole issue of policing and resourcing for the 21st century can be done independently, robustly and properly. Will the Leader of the House advise me of the best way to persuade the Government to implement that police royal commission?

[That this House celebrates the hard work and determination of police officers across the country to serve their community against the backdrop of financial cuts preventing their ability to do so as effectively as they could; notes that it has become difficult to establish precisely what resources the police need long term to act effectively; further notes a Royal Commission has not been carried out for almost 60 years; calls for a new Royal Commission on policing to establish precisely what is required by UK police forces to ensure they continue to serve their community against the backdrop of financial cuts; and properly.]

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this issue, which gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to all the amazing work of our police forces right across the United Kingdom, particularly at Christmas, when they often do not get to eat their Christmas lunch while the rest of us do. The hon. Gentleman asked about a royal commission. He will be aware that we have just had the police funding review statement in this place, and that we have set out our serious violence strategy as well as the Offensive Weapons Bill. The Government are taking every possible step to try to address the challenge of changing criminal behaviour, including the rise in county lines, knife crime, moped crime and so on. We are dealing with those issues, so it is not considered necessary to have a royal commission.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish you and all hon. and right hon. Members a merry Christmas. There are only 103 days until 29 March, and the Government have only just published the draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill. In the event of our leaving the EU without a deal, we will have no method of protecting our environment—investigating and prosecuting environmental crimes without this Bill going through Parliament, so when are we to expect its First Reading? How will sufficient time be made available to ensure this Bill is passed before 29 March?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that all of the acquis communautaire was brought into UK law in the EU withdrawal Bill, in order to ensure that all the existing measures—provisions on the bathing quality of our waters, and measures to keep rivers clean, protect our environment and air quality, and so on—are brought into UK law. It is therefore not right to say that there will be no means at all to protect our environment. Very importantly, the UK has brought in new measures through the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We have a 25-year environment plan for England that demonstrates our ambition to be
the first generation to leave our environment in a better place than we found it. As the hon. Gentleman points out, the draft Bill is coming forward, and we will be introducing that Bill. It is our intention that the UK will have the highest environmental standards—among the best in the world—and we will continue to take steps to ensure that that becomes the case.

**Martyn Day** (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): Just last week, Councillor David Balfour in Grangemouth passed me one of the most harrowing universal credit cases that I have seen so far. The case involved a couple with disabilities who had worked on zero-hours contracts for a period of only five weeks together, and then had their contract terminated, following which they had eight weeks without any income whatever; the husband attempted suicide during that period. This case is genuinely harrowing. I would like to see an urgent statement from Ministers as to how we can rectify intergovernmental Department communications. Despite the best efforts of the Department for Work and Pensions, the problem is that it cannot communicate directly with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, and that has prolonged the agony and misery that was almost tragic in this situation.

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is raising a very serious constituency case and he is right to do so in the Chamber. He will be aware that the Government have listened very carefully to views raised across the House and have changed the roll-out of universal credit so that anybody is able to get 100% of their first full month’s payment upfront on the day they apply for it, if they need to. We have a new contract with Citizens Advice so that it can help people to sign up for universal credit. There are new measures to scrap the seven-day waiting period and to increase the amount that someone can earn before their universal credit begins to be withdrawn. It is a good measure that is designed to help people into work, which is the best way of supporting people to have the security of an income for themselves and their families. With regards to the specific point the hon. Gentleman raises, we do have DWP questions on 7 January—the first day back—and I encourage him to raise the matter directly with Ministers.

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): Like the last Quality Street in the tin or the leftover Turkey or nut roast, there is always a leftover; and I am afraid it is me today. I have been contacted by a number of people in Plymouth who have dialled 999 to request an ambulance and have had to wait hours and hours for one to come. That is not because our paramedics and NHS staff are not working hard enough; it is simply because there are too few of them and too much demand. Could we have a debate in Government time in the new year on the resources we need to keep our emergency services operating at peak efficiency, ensuring that no other people around the country have to wait as long as my constituents have had to in order to get a life-saving ambulance?

**Andrea Leadsom:** The hon. Gentleman is obviously a coffee cream; I think that has got to be the last one in the Quality Street box.

The hon. Gentleman will appreciate that we would all like to pay tribute to the amazing work done by emergency staff, particularly ambulance staff, at this time of year. We have seen emergency admissions via A&E rise by over 6% compared with the same time last year, which means there is a great challenge for all emergency workers. During the build-up to this winter, the Government have provided enough money for ambulance trusts to buy just over 250 state-of-the-art ambulances. We have also provided investment in the 111 service, so that it can move from being a service that can assess and refer to being a service that can consult and complete, in order to try to help people who do not necessarily need to use the ambulance service. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this matter, but the Government remain fully committed to ensuring that we keep pace with the rising demand from our population.
## Point of Order

12.47 pm

*Marsha De Cordova* (Battersea) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Let me too wish you a very merry Christmas.

Today the Department for Work and Pensions released information on the review of 1.6 million personal independence payment claimants that is taking place following the High Court ruling in December last year which found that the Department had unlawfully discriminated against those experiencing psychological distress. The figures show that there are still 1.5 million claimants left to have a review, many of whom may be forced to wait years to receive that vital social security support that they need and are entitled to. Please can you give me some advice as to how Members can question the figures that have been published today? Given that this is one of six reviews currently being carried out by the Department, it is only fair to assess that the Department is absolutely in chaos in relation to social security.

*Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton)*: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. I am sure that the Table Office will offer a lot of advice about different ways in which these issues can be raised, through parliamentary questions and so on. I think the Leader of the House also said that we have DWP questions on the first day back, so I am sure the hon. Lady will raise the matter then. In the meantime, I am also confident that the Treasury Bench will have heard her concerns.

### BILL PRESENTED

**Immigration and Social Security Co-ordination (EU Withdrawal)**

*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Secretary Sajid Javid, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Karen Bradley, Secretary Amber Rudd, Caroline Nokes and Alok Sharma, presented a Bill to make provision to end rights to free movement of persons under retained EU law and to repeal other retained EU law relating to immigration; to confer power to modify retained direct EU legislation relating to social security co-ordination; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Monday 7 January 2019, and to be printed (Bill 309) with explanatory notes (Bill 309-EN).*

## Backbench Business

### Rohingya Refugee Crisis

12.49 pm

*Rushanara Ali* (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis facing Rohingya refugees; agrees with the findings of the UN fact-finding mission that genocide and war crimes have been carried out against the Rohingya by senior Myanmar military figures; calls on the Government to pursue an ICC referral for Myanmar through the UN Security Council; and further calls on the Government to put pressure on the United Nations to prevent the repatriation of the Rohingya from Bangladesh to unsafe conditions in Myanmar and continue to provide assistance to Rohingya refugees.

I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate and to my co-sponsor, the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), who co-chairs the all-party parliamentary group on the rights of the Rohingya.

I want to also extend my gratitude to my co-chair of the APPG on democracy in Burma, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), and to all Members of Parliament who supported the application for this important debate.

We are deeply concerned about the horrific ongoing crisis affecting Rohingya people in Burma and Bangladesh. We are close to Christmas, and I know that many colleagues would have liked to be here to support this motion if not for family or constituency commitments.

The proximity to Christmas should remind us all of our duty to refugees. The Christmas story reminds us of the plight of those displaced from their homes.

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for getting this important topic debated in Parliament, because many people out there will think that the British public and its Parliament have forgotten the desperate plight of the Rohingya. Does my hon. Friend agree that, while we commend the Bangladeshi Government for their incredible generosity in dealing with hundreds of thousands of refugees, we must compel our own Government to do a lot more to assist them and to hold to account Aung San Suu Kyi and her regime for the crimes perpetrated against the Rohingya people?

**Rushanara Ali**: I very much agree with my hon. Friend’s sentiments. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us on what action the Government are taking, because we depend on the Foreign Secretary and Foreign Office Ministers to take a leadership role.

Spending time in our warm homes this Christmas will remind us of the conditions in which people are living in the camps in both Burma and Bangladesh. Being with friends and family will remind us of those separated from their loved ones, some forever. At a time of peace and good will, we should recall the fate of the Rohingya people and other refugees around the world who are subject to war, rape, execution and mutilation, their villages burnt and their lives destroyed.

This is not the first time that the House has debated the Rohingya refugee crisis, and it will not be the last. This is one of the greatest humanitarian crises of our time.
The United Nations fact-finding mission concluded that the Burmese military were responsible for “consistent patterns of serious human rights violations and abuses...in addition to serious violations of international humanitarian law.” It made concrete recommendations that the Burmese military “should be investigated and prosecuted in an international criminal tribunal for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes.”

And yet so little has been done in practical terms to solve the crisis, provide safety and security for the Rohingya people and bring those responsible to justice.

How did we get here? We know from the history books that human beings only behave like this towards one another after a process of dehumanisation. From Cambodia to Srebrenica, massacres are carried out when communities have been isolated, demonised and presented as subhuman and worthy only of extinction. The Rohingya Muslim minority in Burma have been the subject of decades of systematic segregation and racial discrimination. Much of the forced segregation stems from the citizenship law of 1982, under which full citizenship in Burma is based on membership of one of the national races—a category awarded only to those considered to have settled in Burma prior to 1824, the date of the first occupation by the British. In Burma’s national census, the Muslim minority group was initially allowed to self-identify as Rohingya, but the Government later reversed that freedom and deemed that they could be identified only as Bengali, which they do not accept because they are not Bengali.

Over the past few years, the Rohingya have been indiscriminately targeted by the Burmese military. The August 2017 attacks were the most systematic and the largest in scale, but they were not the first. Attacks in 2012 and 2016 led to the internal displacement of more than 124,000 Rohingya people, who were forced to live in what are effectively prison camps in Rakhine state, with extremely limited access to food, healthcare and shelter. I visited those camps in Rakhine state twice, and the conditions have not got any better. People are arbitrarily deprived of liberty and forced to live in conditions described by the UN deputy relief chief as “beyond the dignity of any people”.

There are echoes of apartheid in Rakhine, with one racial group separated, corralled and delegitimised. There are echoes too of previous genocides, with civilians sent to camps, villages burnt and human rights trampled under military boots. But this is not the 1930s, the ’40s, the ’70s or the ’90s. It is happening in this day and age, as we sit here in the Chamber this Christmas.

Aung San Suu Kyi’s failure to condemn the violence and stand up to the military has been deeply disappointing. While power over security operations constitutionally resides with the military and her power to halt the military offensive is limited, her ability to speak out in defence of the Rohingya is not. She spoke out for democracy and human rights from house arrest and liberated her country, and yet she failed to speak out for the rights of the Rohingya people when a genocide took place.

The 2017 attacks by the Burmese military came after a lengthy campaign initiated by those in power to demonise the Rohingya people using online platforms. Hidden behind fake accounts, military officers exploited the wide reach of social media to promote their divisive rhetoric and create a culture of suspicion and anger. They created fake news and sent it into the battle against the Rohingya. Of course, incidents of mass violence have happened before, catalysed by other forms of media. In Rwanda in 1994, local radio stations incited Hutus to kill Tutsis. Within 100 days, 800,000 people were dead. While social media platforms cannot be wholly blamed, the UN fact-finding mission singled out Facebook as a tool used to disseminate hate speech and concluded that it played a “determining role” in inciting violence against the Rohingya.

Social media can also be a force for good, as it was in the Arab spring in 2010-11. It is highly influential and can play a positive role. However, it is important that we recognise its capacity to foment division and incite violence—and, in this case, murder. Social media companies have a responsibility to ensure that malicious posts and dehumanising material are removed from their sites without delay. We must ensure that there are regulations and controls to prevent these abuses from happening again.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and on her outstanding advocacy of all that is best in the determination of this country to drive a human rights agenda internationally. I visited Myanmar three years ago. It was a beautiful country of immense potential, emerging—we thought—out of an era of authoritarianism, but it is now scarred and shamed by the treatment of the Rohingya. Does she agree that an unambiguous message needs to be sent today that the Government of Myanmar will forever be a pariah state until they end the shameful war crimes against this noble people, the Rohingya?

Rushanara Ali: I share my hon. Friend’s concerns. The Government need to make it absolutely clear to the Burmese military and the Burmese Government that if they continue to carry on like this without progress on this very important issue, they will continue to be seen in a very negative light and as a pariah state. They will face difficulty doing trade, quite rightly, and challenges from the wider international community. If they want to make the transition towards democracy, and want to make sure that human rights are protected, they have to take action to get their country in order to protect people’s rights, including the rights of the Rohingya minority—and other minorities, because the military have been attacking others too.

There are now over 1 million Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. Over half the refugees are children, 160,000 of whom are under the age of four. Following the 2017 attacks orchestrated by the Burmese military, some 700,000 Rohingya refugees joined hundreds of thousands who had already fled there following previous periods of targeted attacks, notably in 2012 and 2016. The border pathways are particularly dangerous. Last year, Amnesty International accused the Burmese Government of having laid landmines in the path of fleeing women and children.

In July 2018, I visited Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh with the International Rescue Committee to see for myself the situation of the Rohingya refugees, and to hear about their lives in the camps and how they got there. The overwhelming, immediate impression is the scale of the disaster. Almost 1 million people are now packed densely into only five square miles. During my visit,
I heard terrifying stories of the brutal violence and persecution that the Rohingya faced at the hands of the military during last year’s attacks. The people I met were traumatised, unable to sleep or eat. Daughters were raped in front of their mothers; children were burnt to death in front of their parents. Women and men were separated into different rooms and slaughtered. A father painfully told me of his son and how he had been burnt to death in front of him. As I left, he added, “We want justice.”

I met non-governmental organisation relief workers. Local and international agencies are doing incredible work in very difficult circumstances. Some 30,000 NGO workers of Bangladeshi nationality are working in camps with international NGOs. But the NGOs tell me that the lack of long-term funding is making it very difficult for them to plan ahead and scale up their work, not to mention the restricted access and bureaucracy in trying to work in the camps. Although the situation is marginally better than in Rakhine, there are major challenges, and only two thirds of the UN appeal for funding has been fulfilled. That is not enough, and our Government need to do more to ensure that the outstanding funding is committed by the international community.

Last year, the response from the authorities and the people of Bangladesh was incredible. They demonstrated immense generosity to the refugees, despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, with millions of people living below the poverty line and facing the greatest risks from climate change. Over recent years, when thousands were killed by the Burmese military and hundreds of thousands sought refuge, Bangladesh kept its borders open and provided them with sanctuary. But the international community and other neighbouring states must do more to support that country in the humanitarian crisis. We know from our experience in Europe that absorbing so many people is a massive challenge even for this continent, which is among the wealthiest in the world. The end result must be the peaceful return of the Rohingya to their homes, but that must happen only when it is safe and when the Rohingya believe that the danger has passed.

These are particularly turbulent times for the Rohingya people, as only a few weeks ago, in the run-up to the planned repatriation date, there were reports of an increased military presence in the camps. This, according to the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, has caused a state of terror and panic. All the families placed on the list for repatriation refused to return to Burma as they were too afraid of the current conditions. It is imperative that any return is safe, dignified, and, crucially, voluntary. It is vital that we keep up international pressure on the Burmese Government. They need to know that the world is watching.

I welcome the contributions by Nobel peace prize winners Tawakkol Karman, Shirin Ebadi and Mairead Maguire, who implored Aung San Suu Kyi to “wake up” to the atrocities after they visited Cox’s Bazar. Nobel laureates such as Malala Yousufzai, Muhammad Yunus and Desmond Tutu, among others, have also spoken out. I welcome the legal voices who have spoken out in favour of human rights and justice—Amal Clooney and Ben Emmerson QC, among others. I welcome the interventions made by Cate Blanchett, who visited the camps in her role as a UN good will ambassador, and by Angelina Jolie as a special envoy of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Others have supported the humanitarian fundraising effort by visiting the camps to raise awareness and keep the media interested and engaged in what is happening. They include Ashley Judd, Mindy Kaling, Freida Pinto, Priyanka Chopra, and many others.

Most of all, I am incredibly grateful to, and commend, my colleagues in this House and the other House who have visited Burma and Bangladesh and publicly campaigned and voiced their concerns. The fact is that the more attention we generate, the brighter the light we shine, and the more noise we make, the less likely that further murders and atrocities will occur. Scrutiny and activism from campaigners, the media and the wider international community is literally the only line of defence for the Rohingya people against the Burmese military and its might.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): I commend my hon. Friend for the fantastic campaigning that she personally has done, as well as all the other people she listed. One of the main difficulties is that at the United Nations, there are two Governments, one in the Security Council and one in the General Assembly—China and India—who have been supporting the Government in Myanmar. The Chinese, in particular, have massive investments in Rakhine province, and, as a result, they have not been prepared to take the action that should be required internationally. Does she agree?

Rushanara Ali: I could not agree more. I will come on to that. I very much hope that the Government will build the alliance that is needed to get support at the United Nations.

The United Kingdom has a unique responsibility towards Burma. We must use all our relationships, forged over many centuries, to argue for a peaceful settlement to the crisis. We are also the penholder in the United Nations for Burma. We must apply all the pressure that we can. However, as hon. Friends and others have pointed out, it is not just about our humanitarian response to the 1 million refugees, nor the prevention of future violence, nor even the return of the Rohingya to their homes; ultimately, it is about justice.

Here in the UK, many Members of Parliament have consistently campaigned against the persecution of Rohingya people. On many occasions, we have pleaded with the Prime Minister and successive Foreign Secretaries. We have held parliamentary debates. We have used our platforms publicly to denounce the atrocities. While there have been welcome changes in tone from the Foreign Secretary, and a more critical and proactive stance is being taken, including by his Ministers, this has yet to translate into a stronger policy.

Over the years, there has been little concrete action from the UK Government to solve this issue. In 2017, we warned the Government of increasing tensions in Rakhine state weeks before the brutal military campaign, but little was done to prevent it. When asked in a parliamentary debate last year, the Minister said that if the United Nations determined genocide, then “of course the UK Government will be the first to be supportive of taking these matters to the International Criminal Court.”—[Official Report, 17 October 2017; Vol. 629, c. 780.]
Twelve months later, there has still been very little progress. Last November, the Prime Minister called explicitly for more action and said that the humanitarian crisis “is something for which the Burmese authorities—and especially the military—must take full responsibility.”

She went on to pledge that Britain would “continue to play a leading role in bringing the international community together...to do everything possible to stop this appalling and inhuman destruction of the Rohingya people.”

The sad reality is that our Government, while strong on providing humanitarian assistance, have not come close to putting real pressure on the Burmese Government and their military leaders. It should not have taken more deaths and displacement to make the international community take notice. This crisis happened on our watch. The UK Government should publicly press the Burmese Government to immediately stop all abuses, remove restrictions on freedom of movement, improve conditions for all Rohingya in Rakhine state, and grant unfettered access to Rakhine state to humanitarian agencies and rights monitors. The UK Government should insist that no repatriation of Rohingya refugees takes place until it is safe to do so. The UK and concerned Governments should call on the Bangladeshi Government to halt their plans to relocate refugees to Bhasan Char and encourage them, instead, to consider alternative, safer and more feasible options for relocating those who are vulnerable in the current camps.

The UK Government must press the Burmese authorities to take steps to address the culture of marginalisation and discrimination of the Rohingya community in Burma and to reform the 1982 citizenship law, which renders the Rohingya stateless and denies them basic human rights. The UK Government must accept the full findings and recommendations of the United Nations fact-finding mission, and they should play a leadership role in pressing the United Nation Security Council to urgently refer the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court so that all crimes, not just the crimes of deportation, can be considered.

The international community must not allow the Burmese military to get away with the slaughter, rape, torture and displacement of the Rohingya people on such a scale that it constitutes genocide. I ask the Minister to address head on the issues of getting the International Criminal Court to bring the criminals to justice. That is vital not only in this instance of genocide but in the prevention of future genocides.

After the holocaust we said “never again.” After the killing fields of Cambodia we said “never again.” After Srebrenica we said “never again.” And after 800,000 people were slaughtered in 100 days in Rwanda we said “never again.” It is time we pledged to end genocide, to work for peace and to bring perpetrators to justice, because genocide continues to occur. This time let us say “never again” and mean it. Let us bring the war criminals to court and give the Rohingya people the justice they deserve.

1.11 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and I do not disagree with a word she said. I completely agree that it is up to us to keep this as a hot topic.

Yesterday, there was some Punch and Judy, some pantomime—call it what you like—in the House, and the coverage took up acres of press space. It is on the front page of every paper and every freesheet today, yet this hugely important debate probably will not get a column inch tomorrow. The Press Gallery is empty, and sadly this debate will not be watched by many people on telly. This is not a bit of theatre or a bit of entertainment; it is the most crucial issue affecting us as a country today. This is about our values and who we are. I say to any of the press who are listening remotely: if I do not see this covered tomorrow, be judged by your own standards when you judge us in here, because there are those of us in here who are interested in the important topics. I know there are not many people in the Chamber today, but that is not because we do not care.

In our defence, when the hon. Lady and I went to the Backbench Business Committee, it recognised how important and time-sensitive this topic is, but we were not allocated a date. We were given the possibility of a date and that date has shifted three times. However, because we feel this topic is so crucial, so important, we were prepared to take any date we could. Today is the thinnest date on the calendar for many Members because they will have made alternative arrangements. Because that date shifted all the time, it was hard for many Members to make it here today, but colleagues have told me that they feel acutely about this topic, too. Only a few Members are here, but those who are here are very knowledgeable, they care and they have a burning desire to see justice for the Rohingya.

As the hon. Lady said, an election is looming in Bangladesh—hopefully it will be a well-contested election—at the end of the month, which is why we wanted to make sure we had the debate now. The Secretary of State came to give a presentation to the all-party parliamentary groups on Burma and on the rights of the Rohingya. Whoever is in charge of Bangladesh in 2019, and we take no sides, the problem will last for a very long time and a handover is required to ensure continuity of care for those involved. If there is any change of regime, I want to be sure that the Secretary of State will be straight on the phone to keep up the pressure on the new regime to do the right thing by the Rohingya in these camps.

As the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, most non-governmental organisations now estimate that up to 1 million Rohingya refugees are living in southern Bangladesh. Kutupalong is the largest refugee camp in the world, with a population of over 700,000. It is the same size as the city of Glasgow and 50% bigger than the city of Manchester. Other hon. Members and I saw the vast tide of suffering when we visited last September, and the crossings continue even now. The UNHCR has said that 100,000 people have crossed the border in 2018 alone.

In our debate in the House last October, it was widely accepted that ethnic cleansing was taking place. The stories coming out of the camps now point to war crimes and even genocide, which is why we felt it timely to have another debate. I challenge the House, as the hon. Lady did, to join the call for the actions of the Myanmar Government and militia to be referred to the ICC.

I wanted to intervene on the hon. Lady, but she was in full flow. The one thing I would say is that Aung San Suu Kyi has not just turned a blind eye but has actually...
been complicit. She has said that she does not see these things happening. She sent officials over to the camps, and they said that they did not see Rohingya but saw only Bangladeshis. As the hon. Lady said, they are not Bangladeshis; they are Rohingya.

The fact-finding mission report of 24 October 2018 said that this is an “ongoing genocide.” The word “ongoing” should fill us with horror. This is not an event that has finished, hence the need for this debate. The investigators told the UN that the atrocities continue. They are happening now, as we sit here.

In response to a letter from the all-party parliamentary group on the rights of the Rohingya, which the hon. Lady and I both signed, the Secretary of State said in early November that he had told Aung San Suu Kyi that there must be accountability. I would say that is putting it mildly. I accept that the Secretary of State is using his best endeavours, but could he pep them up somewhat next year?

The Secretary of State also said that the Government are not naïve about the Burmese commission of inquiry, which he said needs to be strengthened to have credibility and to be a path to justice. Will the Minister tell us how that is going to happen? Good words butter no parsnips, particularly at Christmas. I am not sure that, without any root, we will be any the wiser. The Secretary of State said that he does not think this can be immediately dismissed and that he intends to press the Government of Myanmar to ensure that the concerns are addressed. Again, I would like the Minister to give us some information on how that will come about.

Sadly, the Secretary of State does not think we have the votes for an ICC referral at present, and he believes that a referral to the UNSC would be vetoed. I do not know at what point we will ever test that. If we can keep the votes for an ICC referral at present, and he believes on how that will come about.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Lady for her leadership in helping to secure this debate, and I fully agree with her comments condemning genocide. Does she agree that our Government must publicly condemn the Myanmar Government for practices and policies that promote racism and segregation, and that the 1982 citizenship law must be repealed or brought into line with international standards?

Mrs Main: I am not sure how that law could be repealed, although I completely agree, and the fact that those people do not exist in law means that they will never have legal protection. I join the hon. Gentleman’s call for our Government to do more. I am aware that these things are difficult and that the soft voice of diplomacy must be exercised, but sometimes there needs to be an end.

As I was saying, I do not think anyone can dispute that this is genocide. Perhaps it is just me and I do not understand the legal terms of this, but the actus reus includes killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, and imposing measures that are intended to prevent births within the group. All those things are happening, but who is being held accountable? I say again: let us try to bring that charge of genocide; let us shame the world and those people who would exercise their veto. Oxfam has said that it agrees with the findings in the UN fact-finding mission’s report. There are no independent and impartial courts in Burma, and with the military treated as above the law, the international community should step in to ensure justice and accountability for the systematic rape, torture and murder of Rohingya refugees.

These are the worst crimes. The 1998 Rome statute of the International Criminal Court defines crimes against humanity, when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against any civilian populations, as any of the following acts: murder, extermination, enslavement, deportation or forcible transfer of population, imprisonment, torture, grave bodily or mental harm to persons, persecution, enforced disappearance of persons, and the crime of apartheid—all things that the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow referred to today. She has seen them happening, I have seen them happening. Members across the House have seen them happening—there is no dispute. These are crimes against humanity. This is a genocide. Today on this, the quietest day of the year, although we are not standing up and saying “this House commands whoever is in charge to try to make a charge of genocide” I would love there to be a vote. But we are not voting and there are not enough of us here to do that anyway. But I think the sentiment of the House says exactly that.

The Rohingya are crossing because they are being driven out and fear for their lives. They are crossing while being shot in the back and legs to drive them faster in their flight. They are crossing because they are being persecuted, denied citizenship and, as the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) pointed out, they have no recognition in law. They are being denied land and livelihood. They are crossing dangerous borders strewn with landmines to escape from burnt homes, abductions, brutal beatings, mutilation, murder and rape. They are crossing because they are fearful of being obliterated,
erased because of who they are and what they believe. Because they are Muslims and they are Rohingya they have no safe place in Myanmar, and it is no surprise that none of them wants to go back.

A year on there has been a terrible harvest in the camps as a result of those atrocities. That harvest is babies, born as a result of rape and violence. It has been estimated—I was talking to the new high commissioner in this country—that an average of 60 babies a day are being born in those camps. Most reports acknowledge that we do not know how many babies have been born as a result of rape, due to secrecy and the desire to hide what people see as the shameful stigma of violation. When we visited the camp, it was estimated that up to 50% of all women there were pregnant, although most reports acknowledge that it is nearly impossible to know how many thousands of pregnant women there are. Aid workers have been searching the camps for young pregnant Rohingya girls, some barely in their teens.

Reports say that only one in five births in the camps are delivered in health centres. That is not because there are no health centres, difficult though such facilities are to access; there is regular reporting of hidden births and self-conducted abortions. Those who have visited the camps have seen the ankle-deep mud and the conditions, and young girls who have been brutalised and raped are experiencing self-induced abortions, because of the shame of carrying a child that will be forever a burden on their family. For those who have not gone down that route, pregnancies due to rape have also led to reports of baby abandonment.

Aid agencies are working to provide care and support for young pregnant women and abandoned newborn babies. As I said to the high commissioner, I want to know what is happening to those children who are born in the no-man’s land of being stateless. They are born vulnerable to exploitation, being sent into prostitution and sexual exploitation, they are disappearing and even being sent to a dreadful death in those camps as a result of people not knowing they exist. We need to push for the crimes against those babies, and their mothers, to be punished, and that is why we must make a stand on the world stage. The mothers and those babies are victims. Some 55% of Rohingya refugees are children, and 160,000 people in the camps are four years old or younger. Many families told us that they had lost key male relatives to murder and enforced disappearances after the militia swooped on homes and carted the men and boys away.

As the hon. Lady said, Bangladesh has been commended by many NGOs for its generosity to the Rohingya, and praised by groups for its constructive engagement with Myanmar. However, Myanmar has yet to deliver safe, voluntary and dignified conditions. It has not guaranteed citizenship rights for those who return, and the Rohingya are rightly fearful of return. Indeed, some have returned—some are Boormarang Rohingya, if that is the right way of putting it. They have gone back, trusted in warm words, only to find the same thing happening again. No trust is left at all.

UNHCR and the United Nations Development Programme are yet to be granted full access to Rakhine state to see the conditions, and people cannot and must not go back to conditions that in effect will be an isolated internment camp. That is not sanctuary; that is imprisonment. However, the international community does not always step up. The UN joint response plan for the Rohingya is still seriously underfunded—at present, it is 70% funded, and about $250 million short of what is needed. The USA has contributed 40% of the fund, which is $277 million. As the hon. Lady said, this country has sent a generous contribution of $84 million, but the European Commission has provided only 7% of the fund at $49 million. The European Union should examine its conscience and provide a fair share of funding to help to shoulder the enormous burden that is afflicting Bangladesh.

We cannot just sit by and allow this issue to be shuffled off into two column inches tomorrow. The House will speak today. It may not have as loud a voice as it did yesterday, but its intent is far stronger and its commitment to justice will not go away. If next year we are here again, we should hold our heads in shame and silence for all those who will have died in the time that it has taken us to make our minds up and to act.

1.27 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure and privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main). They make a powerful cross-party team in leading this debate, and in their excellent and ongoing efforts to ensure that the cause of the Rohingya remains firmly on our agenda in the House and the public debate.

The International Development Committee has followed closely the ongoing humanitarian crisis—the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) is our rapporteur on the issue—and over the past year we have published three reports relating to Burma, Bangladesh and the Rohingya. The first report, from January, focused on the issues that both hon. Members spoke about, including the culmination of decades of marginalisation, persecution and abuse that the Rohingya people have faced in Burma.

We then looked more widely at the work of the UK Government in general, and DFID in particular, in Bangladesh and Burma. Like others, the Committee visited the Rohingya camps in Cox’s Bazar, and we heard the voices of the Rohingya people and saw the huge challenges of life in the camps for those families. The scale and complexity of this humanitarian crisis is best experienced at first hand if at all possible. We also sought to visit Burma and to ask difficult questions about what is happening, but we were refused visas by the Burmese Government.

In our final report, we joined the call, already set out so eloquently today, on the UK Government to gather support for the UN Security Council to refer Burma to the International Criminal Court and to apply targeted financial sanctions against identifiable key figures with responsibility for what is happening. I am pleased again today to echo those calls for the UK to pursue such an ICC referral, but I will focus my remarks on the other issues raised in the motion, about repatriation and some of the broader humanitarian concerns.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend accept that the problem does not relate only to the Rohingya? The Kachin and Shan people have a long
history of subjugation by the Burmese authorities. It is an absolute tragedy that the regime picks on those groups without any real comeback from the international community. Does he agree that that is part and parcel of the whole problem in Myanmar?

Stephen Twigg: I agree entirely and wholeheartedly; in fact, my hon. Friend has anticipated something I was going to mention later in my speech. A number of highly respected advocacy groups, such as Christian Solidarity Worldwide and Human Rights Watch, have documented appalling human rights abuses by the Burmese military in both Kachin and Shan states. There is a broader set of questions about the protection of minorities in Burma; the Rohingya example is perhaps the most potent and large-scale, but my hon. Friend is right to remind us of the Kachin and Shan peoples as well.

Let me address the issue of repatriation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, last month there was an attempted repatriation of refugees following the announcement by the repatriation joint working group of the Governments of Bangladesh and Burma that repatriation would begin then. When that was announced, many of the refugees fled and hid in the surrounding forest. There was at least one reported suicide—someone so fearful of what returning to Burma would entail that they took their own life. As the buses arrived at the camp in Cox’s Bazar, a number of refugees were offered the opportunity to return. There were anecdotal reports that they were offered food in return for boarding the buses. As my hon. Friend said, no refugee agreed to return, and the buses left the camp empty. That clearly showed the refugees’ fear about any suggestion of returning in the current situation.

Why is there that fear? As Marzuki Darusman, the chair of the UN fact-finding mission, reported in October, and as the hon. Member for St Albans emphasised so powerfully, the genocide against the Rohingya is ongoing in Burma. Why on earth would the Rohingya seek to return? We have a responsibility to hold both the Burmese and Bangladeshi Governments accountable on their stated commitments that repatriation will happen only when it is safe, voluntary and dignified.

I urge the Minister to commit again to ensuring that the important principle of non-refoulement is upheld—that people are not returned against their will and that the Government will continue to speak out clearly and publicly against any refugee returns that are premature, non-voluntary or in any way dangerous. It is pretty clear that the current lack of any sign of political will from the Government of Burma to address the conditions that led to this refugee displacement suggests, sadly, that conditions conducive to return are unlikely for quite some long time.

The protracted nature of the displacement crisis means that we have to think more about the short to medium-term needs of both the refugee community in Bangladesh and the local host Bangladeshi population. We need action to address the barriers to Rohingya self-reliance, including employment and access to services. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, nearly 1 million Rohingya refugees are living in Cox’s Bazar, and barely 4% of them have any form of legal status.

We can learn lessons from other protracted displacement crises. The International Development Committee was in east Africa last month, looking at some of the consequences of displacement from South Sudan, Sudan, Congo and Eritrea, and at how in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda there are now sustained attempts to set up programmes that provide hope to not only refugees and internally displaced people but the often very poor local communities. We can learn from that example.

However, the best example that we can learn from is what has been done in Jordan for Syrian refugees. The Jordan compact is an agreement between the Government of Jordan, the World Bank, the European Union and others to support Syrian refugees to access employment. Under the agreement, Jordan reduced its regulatory barriers on refugees’ right to work. Two years on, the compact has led to considerable improvements in labour market access for Syrian refugees and education.

If we fail to provide comparable opportunities in Bangladesh, for both the Rohingya and the often very poor local Bangladeshi population, we know what the risks are. We are aware of the boredom that comes from living in a refugee camp and what relying on humanitarian assistance does for the dignity and sense of self-worth of refugees and their families. Policy changes are needed to create opportunities for the Rohingya to enjoy wellbeing and self-sufficiency so that they do not have to rely so much on aid in future and can maximise their own potential.

As has rightly been said, the Bangladeshi people and their Government deserve praise for welcoming about 1 million Rohingya refugees. We pay tribute to them and rightly congratulate our own Government on DFID’s substantial contribution to the humanitarian effort in both Bangladesh and Burma. We must not lose sight of the global responsibility that Bangladesh has taken on.

We now need to address some of the long-term issues. Will the Minister set out how the Government will mobilise the other donors, the United Nations and partners to build support for the long-term measures that I have talked about—in particular, the idea of a jobs compact? As the hon. Member for St Albans reminded us, the Bangladeshi people will vote in their general election later this month. What discussions have the Government had with the Opposition parties in Bangladesh? It is important that there is continued support for the Rohingya whichever party or alliance of parties forms the next Bangladeshi Government.

I turn to education. We know from other protracted crises, particularly those involving large refugee flows, that education has often not been given the priority that it deserves. There is a real risk of a lost generation of refugee children. I urge the Government, and DFID in particular, to give much higher priority to education in our aid for the Rohingya. In July, Save the Children reported that more than 70% of Rohingya children in the camps were not in school. They are being deprived of the chance of a proper education. UNICEF has warned that children living in refugee camps face a bleak future:

“If we don’t make the investment in education now, we face the very real danger of seeing a ‘lost generation’ of Rohingya”.

One of the central aims of the UN’s global goals is to “leave no one behind”; a substantial increase in finance for, access to and quality of education in Cox’s Bazar is required to achieve that for Rohingya children. As both
my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow and the hon. Member for St Albans said so powerfully, humanitarian finance suffers from being short-term and unpredictable. The underfunding in this case is in line with pretty much all the funds for comparable humanitarian crises around the world. If education provision does not get priority and is ignored, the future of the children caught up in these crises through no fault of their own is at great risk.

In our report last year on education, the IDC recommended that the Government should establish a long-term strategy for education in emergencies. The reality is that, tragically, larger numbers of children are now living in these emergency situations—refugee crises often caused by conflict, ethnic cleansing and genocide and sometimes by climate change. The mechanisms to ensure that they get the education they deserve need to be in place; that is not happening at the moment. Support for programmes such as education cannot wait. That is now working, which is very welcome, but we need more of it.

We also need practical steps to minimise some of the risks that Rohingya people face in their day-to-day lives—basic but important things such as the quality of lighting, the lack of privacy in toilets and bathroom facilities and the absence of security for women and girls who have to leave the camps for whatever reason. All of that has come together to create, as the hon. Member for St Albans said, an environment that is incredibly unsafe, particularly for women and children, who form at least 70% of the Rohingya refugee population. Many arrived in Bangladesh having reported alarming gender-based violence by the Burmese military. Now that they are in Bangladesh, supposedly in safety, they still face enormous risks, with numerous examples of incidents of gender-based violence in the camps.

The International Rescue Committee says that despite that, there remains a significant gap in services that are targeted particularly at women and girls. I join the IRC in urging our Government to work with the Government of Bangladesh and other donors to secure a significant increase in support for programmes that relate specifically to the needs of women and girls, and especially to those of either sex who face gender-based sexual violence.

Finally, more needs to be done to ensure that we are ready for the monsoon season. When we visited in February, we heard a lot of concern about the 2018 monsoon season, and how ready the camp and its facilities and the absence of security for women and girls who have to leave the camps for whatever reason. All of that has come together to create, as the hon. Member for St Albans said, an environment that is incredibly unsafe, particularly for women and children, who form at least 70% of the Rohingya refugee population. Many arrived in Bangladesh having reported alarming gender-based violence by the Burmese military. Now that they are in Bangladesh, supposedly in safety, they still face enormous risks, with numerous examples of incidents of gender-based violence in the camps.

The International Rescue Committee says that despite that, there remains a significant gap in services that are targeted particularly at women and girls. I join the IRC in urging our Government to work with the Government of Bangladesh and other donors to secure a significant increase in support for programmes that relate specifically to the needs of women and girls, and especially to those of either sex who face gender-based sexual violence.

Finally, more needs to be done to ensure that we are ready for the monsoon season. When we visited in February, we heard a lot of concern about the 2018 monsoon season, and how ready the camp and its administration was for heavy rainfall. The Select Committee warned, in its second report, that without decisions and actions being taken very quickly, for example to enable relocation to begin and to facilitate other mitigations, people were going to die. When the downpours finally came, they did bring a lot of misery for the Rohingya—thousands of shelters and other structures collapsed, hundreds were injured and, tragically, some did die. However, the impact of the monsoon in 2018 was actually not as bad as our worst fears. I hope the Minister can perhaps say something about the Government’s analysis of why that was the case. Was it that we were better prepared and lessons had been learned, or were we more fortunate with the scale of the weather conditions, meaning that we could possibly face much bigger challenges in 2019? Decisions and actions need to be taken more quickly to mitigate the impact of landslides and floods that could come with the forthcoming monsoon season. In particular, there is the challenge of ensuring there is enough suitable land to enable the immediate relocation of the most exposed and vulnerable refugees, so that that can be done effectively and efficiently.

Let us remember that we face huge immediate humanitarian challenges on shelter, water, food, security, health and education if we are to provide at least some dignity and hope. We know that this is a protracted crisis. It is incumbent on the international community to work together to address it. There are three big challenges. I have chosen to focus, in my remarks, on investment in humanitarian and development support, and the crucial significance of staying for the long term. Alongside that, we must address the key challenges of politics and justice that my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow and the hon. Member for St Albans set out so powerfully.

In the end, we all have a responsibility to protect the refugees and to invest in humanitarian support and long-term development aid, but they have a right to go home, and that is what they want. That will happen only when there is true justice and when the Government of Burma—and, frankly, the people of Burma—address the need to make fundamental changes to their own laws and attitudes to the Rohingya, so that we can have in Burma a country that truly respects and protects the rights of all its people. That feels like a distant hope at the moment, but this debate at least gives us an opportunity, on a cross-party basis, to send a clear message that we will not forget the minorities of Burma. In this debate in particular, we continue to stand in solidarity with the Rohingya people.
I have been going to meetings of the all-party group on Burma. I remember the days when Mr Speaker chaired the group. We had a chap—it must be nearly a decade ago—called Jared Genser, a human rights lawyer, then of DLA Piper. Before Burma opened up into the fledgling transitional democracy that we sort of see struggling at the moment, he made the case that of the seven or eight conditions that one can ascribe to genocide, Burma was the only conflict post-war that matched every single one. Rwanda and Srebrenica matched some of them, but Burma matched every single one. Now we can see the past masters of this heinous crime are using all those instruments time and time again. It is time that we acted.

I want to set out the context of why we have got to where we are. I am half-Burmese and my first question, when I was elected to this place, was on what we then described as the Rohingya boat people. In 2015, people were being pushed out into the seas in fear of their lives, trying to find a safe haven. It was cyclone season and there was a horrendous number of deaths. If we fast forward to 2017, my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans joined me and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) as, I think, the first Members into the refugee camps at Cox’s Bazar just weeks after the latest exodus. At the time “only” 400,000 people had crossed the border. By the time we left, a week later, there were 500,000 people. We are now at 700,000-plus people who have joined those already there.

The Kutupalong camp is the biggest refugee camp in the world. It has been there for 30 years, expanding and expanding significantly. We went to the Gundam border crossing where, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans said, we spoke to people who had been driven across the border chased by helicopters shooting at their ankles and the backs of their legs to hurry them towards the landmine-strewn border. We saw video and photo evidence of people who had had their legs blown off by landmines just four days before we got there. They were being searched by Burmese guards using drones, which were looking at the no-man’s land area where there were 5,000 people in a tiny little area on a curve of a river—they did not want to go to the refugee camps in Bangladesh because at that time they did not know or trust what would happen to them.

We saw people who were dead behind the eyes. These were the people, let us not forget, that the Burmese Government had accused of being terrorists. I saw a 60-year-old lady, who had seen her children genitally mutilated and her son-in-law slaughtered in front of her, and whose house was then burned down. To accuse her of being a terrorist was just fantasyland. As we sat there in Cox’s Bazar airport, Aung San Suu Kyi was on telly saying that nothing else was happening—that there were no fresh attacks. Fast forward a couple of hours and we were back on the Gundam border, and we smelled and saw the smoke from burning villages. It is no surprise that the interminability we are seeing now is a continuation of the denial—the “hear no evil, say no evil, see no evil”—that we observed then.

Because the Burmese people are largely in favour of the exodus of the Rohingya, and because of the whipping up of the nationalist interests of those people, the military in particular are able to hide behind the populist uprising and say, “We have been accused of acts of terror, but that is just western propaganda.” We must cut through that very clearly. We must say, “Look, we will always help you when it comes to democratic support. We will continue the support that we have given in this place over the last few years to enable you to build up the rule of law and democratic structures in your Hluttaw”—the Burmese Parliament—and we will not tell you how to run your country. But we will always call you out when you are breaking, in every sense, every international norm relating to human rights.”

Along with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, I went back to Cox’s Bazar six months after that first trip. It was rewarding to see some of the improvements that had been made thanks to UK Aid, DFID funding and a number of other countries that had come together—and, indeed, thanks to members of the public in this country, who had raised £27 million through the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. Worshippers in mosques and churches and charities around the country came together in a spectacular way, first to raise the money, and secondly to do what we are trying to do here: to keep the voice of the Rohingya in our minds. We saw a huge improvement in the registration camps. It had taken my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans and me perhaps 40 minutes to cross areas that could now be crossed in 10 minutes because of the tracks and roads that had been built over those six months.

I think that landslides and cyclones posed a risk to about 200,000 people. Fortunately, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby said, our worst fears were not realised; none the less, people are still suffering in the makeshift camps, which are cleared jungle. It is the only hillside in Bangladesh: there is pretty flat land below sea level, but they managed to find the only slopes. The area is on an elephant migration track, and unfortunately when people walk around the landslides, some of them are trampled by elephants travelling back and forth on their normal annual path. So there is plenty more for us to do.

I was the rapporteur for the Rohingya report that we produced a few months ago. It is my job to follow up developments and ensure that we are keeping the Government and all the agency and non-governmental organisations on their toes, and that they are fulfilling our recommendations, to which DFID agreed. We could return to some of the stuff that we have talked about before, and discuss how we can prevent crises in the future, but that is for other debates and other crises not yet known. We need to empower the affected people. That means building up leadership structures through DFID and NGOs, but it is also up to the all-party parliamentary group on the rights of the Rohingya, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby, I went back to Cox’s Bazar six months after that first trip. It was rewarding to see some of the improvements that had been made thanks to UK Aid, DFID funding and a number of other countries that had come together—and, indeed, thanks to members of the public in this country, who had raised £27 million through the Disasters Emergency Committee appeal. Worshippers in mosques and churches and charities around the country came together in a spectacular way, first to raise the money, and secondly to do what we are trying to do here: to keep the voice of the Rohingya in our minds. We saw a huge improvement in the registration camps. It had taken my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans and me perhaps 40 minutes to cross areas that could now be crossed in 10 minutes because of the tracks and roads that had been built over those six months.

I think that landslides and cyclones posed a risk to about 200,000 people. Fortunately, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby said, our worst fears were not realised; none the less, people are still suffering in the makeshift camps, which are cleared jungle. It is the only hillside in Bangladesh: there is pretty flat land below sea level, but they managed to find the only slopes. The area is on an elephant migration track, and unfortunately when people walk around the landslides, some of them are trampled by elephants travelling back and forth on their normal annual path. So there is plenty more for us to do.

This is at a slight tangent, but there is one particular thing that I think our Committee needs to do. I appeal to any women Members, if they so choose, to put their names forward when there is a vacancy. Women and Equalities questions took place earlier today, and we
have had plenty of debates about women’s equality, but this is at the heart of what we need to be doing. The Committee currently has just one female member, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham). One of the limitations when we are investigating what is happening in the camps is our inability to go into some of the health clinics and see people who are traumatised by the rape, the violence and the maiming that they have seen. It is impossible for the likes of my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans and me to go there, and even if we did, we would not get the information out. If Parliament is to do its job, it is fundamentally important for the Committee to have a better gender balance in future.

Many Members have mentioned gender-based violence, which is mentioned in one of our recommendations. How can we build up justice, and establish accountability for what has happened? We have clearly said that the military cannot act with impunity, feeling that they can do what they like and get away with it. They must be held to account. The next stage is reconciliation. How can we start to bring the different factions back together? That does not just mean dampening down military control in the country. If the Rohingya manage to return to their homes, they will need to be able to live side by side with the other members of the Rakhine community, who have been whipped up into a nationalist frenzy and pushed into perpetrating some of the violence alongside the militia.

The Rohingya communities were farming some of the land and harvesting, but as people have been pushed into Bangladesh, that has gone to pot, and many of the villages that were burnt have started to turn back into jungle, which is beginning to affect the community as a whole. The entire state is suffering badly, not just the million people who have been pushed out. DFID has done a very good job so far in providing medicine, vaccinations, food, shelter and trauma support, but we need to do much more. This is not just about helping the people who are there. Yes, we can continue to help them, but surely the best way we can help them is to bring an end to the conflict and allow all of them to return safely and in a dignified way, and that means that the citizenship laws must be overturned.

When I first went to Burma in 2016, I met a young lady called Wai Nu, who is now campaigning around the world—in America, in this country and back in Burma. She had been in prison for seven years, and she was 29. She had served a shorter jail sentence than anyone else I had met, purely and simply because she was so little. She had been imprisoned predominantly because of her father, who was a former Member of Parliament for the area. Now, because of those citizenship laws, not only could he no longer be a Member of Parliament, but he could not even vote. He could not even be a citizen of the country in which he had lived for his entire life, which is painfully ridiculous. This is a fundamental issue. We must press for change if the Rohingya are to have any comfort in the knowledge that they will be able to return to their country.

I welcome the fact that the Foreign Secretary and the Minister—who is always very proactive when it comes to matters relating to Burma and, indeed, the whole region, and with whom I have worked very closely—have been far more robust in recent weeks and months in respect of the possibility of a referral to the International Criminal Court. The work that is being done at the United Nations with the international community is extremely important.

We must think about what more we can do to target the military with sanctions. As I have often said in this place, I do not think that we should target the whole of Burma in a “blanket” way, because that would adversely affect so many people who are not in the midst of the conflict and who desperately need our help. We need to target the military so that they cannot feel that they can get away with this with impunity.

We need China’s influence as well. Yes, it has its trading links, but if it wants to be part of a wider trading partnership with the international community, it must realise that it has responsibilities as well. I do not care if ASEAN countries do not come out and say that publicly, as long as they are saying it when they are having conversations with the Burmese military, with whom many countries in the surrounding area are reasonably friendly. They can have private conversations that may bear fruit in the long run. They can say to Burma, “You need to tackle your responsibilities if you want to return as an open member of the international community.”

Finally and briefly, I want to broaden my speech and talk about why I have always believed we need a holistic approach. The hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) talked about the other conflicts, and it is important that we have an understanding of them here, by looking at the Christians in Chin state who are still persecuted, and at northern Shan and Kachin where there is still conflict going on; airstrikes were reported only a few months ago, and there is open fighting. A bomb was found in Shan state just last month. There are also the Reuters journalists who have been put in prison, and a British national, Niranjan Rasalingam, who is in Insein prison serving a 17-year sentence on what many believe are trumped-up financial charges. We need to look at that, and address it by asking, even though many political prisoners have been released, what more we can do to make sure people whose charges might be fake or trumped up are judged under the open rule of law.

Without stopping too much DFID aid around the country, we do need to make sure we provide for the healthcare and educational needs and the democratic structures, so that when Burma finally decides to re-join the international community it has the capacity to do so in its Hluttaw—its Parliament.

I am the trade envoy to Burma and, finally, I want to say that the economic development of Burma is very important. We must build on prosperity and bring people into that, because if they feel the benefit of involvement with the wider international community, through improved facilities and services, micropayments, FinTech solutions for the smaller villages and so forth, that holistic approach will help to drive them back into the wider family of the United Nations.

2.1 pm

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully), who is a member of the International Development Committee and has had the benefit of visiting Cox’s Bazar and therefore gave an informed speech based on first-hand experience. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend
the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), Chair of the Committee, all of whom made powerful and substantial contributions. In particular I thank all three Members for continuing to keep this important issue alive, and continuing to make sure that it is brought back before the House at every opportunity. That should, however, be the role of the Government.

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): We have tried to get a statement on this issue over the last two or three weeks, but were aware that there was great interest in this Backbench Business Committee debate. Obviously, I would have much preferred it to have taken place on a different day when more Members would have been present, but we have been aware of this and would have had a Government statement other than for the fact that there was a real passion on the subject from many Members including the hon. Gentleman.

Imran Hussain: I thank the Minister, but he still has the opportunity to make a statement in the new year, because this is an ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing. I hope he will make such a statement, and at a time when more Members are present and can take part in this important debate. I was actually, however, referring to the last year, but I will come on to that shortly.

This is an extremely important debate, as I have said, but sadly the issue of the persecution of the Rohingya is not a new one; it has taken place for hundreds of years in that region, with violence flaring up on countless occasions. However, this persecution reached new heights last August, with some of the most brutal violence ever seen.

I want to reflect for a few moments on that violence, because the pictures and reports of violence against the Rohingya do not do justice to what they faced; they do not even begin to properly depict the horrors that innocent, men, women and children were subjected to. They faced murder, and their friends and relatives cut down by gunfire, knives, machetes and whatever else soldiers and thugs could lay their hands on. They faced pillage, their homes ransacked, their belongings plundered, and valuables seized. And they faced rape: women and girls—daughters, sisters, and wives—tied to trees and subjected to the most brutal treatment as relatives were forced to watch. Once they had finished inflicting their carnage, the soldiers moved on. Without remorse or reconsideration, they headed to the next village, but not before burning down the one they had just devastated. Homes that had stood for years, built by hand by those who lived in them, were reduced to nothing more than ash. These fires became the face of the violence carried out against the Rohingya, the pictures adorning the pages of the media as journalists were allowed no closer—Burma blocked off to them by a hostile Government fearful of outside independent reporting.

Mrs Main: The hon. Gentleman is describing is recorded so we can bring those responsible to account at some point.

Imran Hussain: The hon. Lady makes an important point. The UN Human Rights Council has taken many first-hand testimonies, but that is just a starting point. Perhaps a Committee of this House—perhaps the International Development Committee or some other appropriate Committee—might choose to take that up; the Chair of the International Development Committee is in the Chamber listening.

This violence was shocking, but it was not as shocking as the response from this Government and the international community. The UK Government and Governments across the world turned a blind eye as the Rohingya screamed, as people pleaded and protested, and as we in this House repeatedly begged for action to be taken. But we did nothing: the UK stood silent, and by doing nothing—by refusing to condemn them—we emboldened the Burmese military. We allowed them to act and we allowed them to carry on and to conduct, in the words of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, a “textbook example of ethnic cleansing.”

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I temper very slightly the comments of the hon. Gentleman? The Foreign Affairs Committee, which I am privileged to chair, was very clear in its criticism of the Burmese military and indeed of Aung San Suu Kyi herself. In evidence session—this is an unusual position for me, but I am going to say it—the Minister who is on the Treasury Bench today was also extremely clear in criticising the Burmese regime. His efforts and those of other Ministers in the Department shadowed by the Committee of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), including the Secretary of State, and of Ministers in the Foreign Office in getting aid to the Bangladesh Government and forward to the refugees have been pretty good. I am not going to argue that we could not have done more, or that we should not do more and must do better, but I do not agree with the idea that we just stood by.

Imran Hussain: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I was referring to the Government, of course, because I know that the Foreign Affairs Committee has done a great deal of work on this. However, let me be absolutely clear that I do not accept what he says, because I stood up in the House soon after the atrocities last August and asked the Minister simply to condemn the brutal actions, to condemn the ethnic cleansing, and to condemn the genocide, but there was no condemnation at that time—the hon. Gentleman might like to look in Hansard if he has any doubt. The reality is that even today I cannot think of one occasion when the Government have openly and forcefully condemned those atrocities in the House. If the Minister wishes to correct me on that, I am more than happy to give way.

Mark Field: I understand that the hon. Gentleman is very passionate about this issue and has raised it several times, but the Government have repeatedly, on the Floor of the House, talked about ethnic cleansing. We stand by the ICC report, which we want to push through the UN Security Council, and I will say more about that later. We have condemned the actions of senior figures
in the Burmese military and played a leading role in ensuring that they are sanctioned at international level, through the European Union rather than through the UN. It is all very well to condemn, but we also have a range of other actions, both humanitarian and political, which I will talk about more in my speech. Although we have condemned, condemnation is never enough; we need a practical plan of action, both for what happened over the past 15 months and hopefully for the months and years to come.

Imran Hussain: I partly accept what the Minister says. Of course condemnation alone does not go the length, but it is absolutely a starting point. Regrettably, the Minister did not condemn at that point—he knows that he did not use the word “condemnation”—and did not strongly condemn the Burmese Government for their actions at that point, perhaps because he wanted to pursue more diplomatic channels. There are times for diplomatic channels, but perhaps condemnation is more appropriate when genocide and ethnic cleansing is happening.

Those on the fact-finding missions to Burma saw for themselves the horrors that have led to the creation of one of the biggest refugee crises ever seen. Yet although the refugees, having fled across difficult and even hostile terrain that saw many die on the journey, have escaped the boot of the Burmese military, they are not safe in Bangladesh. The conditions in the camps in which they reside are on the edge of inhumane.

Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow, have described graphically the conditions in the camps. I will not repeat what has been said, but I want to highlight the really important point made by the hon. Member for St Albans about the children born in Cox’s Bazar. What is their future? What are the thoughts of the young people living day to day in those squalid conditions? Let us all reflect on that.

Paul Scully: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point about the children born in the refugee camps. Does he agree that the 13,000 children who were orphaned and then crossed the border on their own face an equally grim future?

Imran Hussain: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. It is massively important that safeguards are put in place to protect those children. Again, the international community must do more to ensure that we protect the children, whether they are born in the camps or whether they have been orphaned.

Despite those conditions—and we have heard graphic descriptions—many Rohingya would still rather stay in the camps than be repatriated, against their will or with false promises, to the country that tried to kill them. That is a powerful point. Let us be absolutely clear that they are not being relocated back to their villages, which have long since been burnt to the ground, erased by soldiers who are equally keen on erasing the existence of the Rohingya themselves. Instead, they are being relocated to holding camps; camps surrounded by fences and barbed wires; camps that are a prison, not a new home. In these camps the Rohingya are easily identifiable to the Burmese Government, easily located, easily persecuted and easily killed. When the same Government and military who forced them out of their homes, and killed their husbands, wives, sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters, are in power, and when there are no guarantees of their protection other than the word of the same Burmese Government, then safe return is a fiction.

The Rohingya would not be safe. Indeed, they would be even more at risk. We cannot expect them to return to Burma willingly. To guarantee as great a level of protection as possible for the Rohingya and to stop this genocide ever happening again, we need to hold the Burmese Government to account. We need to hold them responsible, and we need to hold them to their commitments and promises to Bangladesh and to the international community. The first real step—the Minister is listening—that the Burmese Government can take, if there is an ounce of will to move in the right direction, is to give immediate and equal citizenship—not a passport to citizenship or a route to citizenship, or any other scheme, but an immediate right to citizenship. Promises and gestures will not do. Only hard action and a firm stance by the language the Burmese Government seem to understand.

The first action we should take is to refer the Burmese Government and the leaders, military and civilian, who are responsible for the Rohingya genocide to the International Criminal Court. That point has been made, and made well. Those who commit grave crimes against humanity do not belong in power; they belong in The Hague, on trial for their actions. The Government occasionally argue back that any referral to the ICC would be vetoed by China, but I say, let them veto it. Let it be known that they did nothing to stop the persecution of innocent civilians. But we should not let it be known that the UK did not even try, that we shielded away from our global responsibilities and that we ran in fear of a veto. The Government have nothing to lose from pushing for a referral and building an international coalition of support for such a measure across the UN General Assembly, but we have our dignity, respect and, above all, our humanity to lose by staying away.

We should not stop there. We must take further action. We need to create a deterrence to prevent this from ever happening again, and we can do that only by creating a serious impact on the Burmese Government. We therefore need to look again at the sanctions that can be imposed on the Burmese military and the companies that are owned by or profit through the military. Some will say that sanctions are dangerous and that they would lead to the toppling of a democratic Government. That may be their concern, but I am concerned that the Government in Burma are no longer democratic or representative anyway, and that Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto President of Burma, is just as culpable for the genocide. She may not have issued the orders, but she was part of the persecution campaign against the Rohingya.

Sanctions will not topple the democratic Government in Burma and will not lead to a military coup. That is just a myth, because those in the Burmese military already have everything they want. They have control over the legislature and the key Government Ministries. They have made reforms that are acceptable to the international community while barely sacrificing an ounce of their power, so why would they rock the boat now? Their violence and genocide against the Rohingya
may have gone unpunished so far, but it is certain that a military coup would not be. To believe in the military coup is simply an excuse, and the Government need to propose measures on how they will respond to the UN report’s findings and impose sanctions on those involved in the genocide that it describes.

Before I finish, I want to stress the importance of ensuring that those who can escape to the UK—those who can legally reside in this country—are able do so. Many Rohingya in Burma have close family in the UK—indeed, my constituency houses the largest population of Rohingya in Europe—but Home Office hoops and legal hurdles mean that they cannot escape the hell in which they find themselves and join their family here. To enter the UK, the Home Office requires an English language test and a tuberculosis test, both of which must be completed at the British consulate in Dhaka. It is impossible for the refugees trapped in Cox’s Bazar to fulfil those criteria, because they are unable to leave. I have spoken with DFID staff about this matter and sought contact with the Home Office, but I have thus far been ignored. I will be grateful to the Minister if he states what further action he can take to allow the tests to be done in the camps. Will he press upon the Home Secretary and the Immigration Minister the importance of lifting restrictions that refugees cannot fulfil?

The Rohingya in my constituency have made a rich contribution to Bradford, and I put on the record my thanks, gratitude and appreciation to them for the positive contribution that the Rohingya community has made to the great district of Bradford.

2.22 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): It is a privilege to take part in this debate, and a real honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), who spoke in this debate with such knowledge and passion. It was a real delight to hear them talk.

Like many other Members present, I took part in the debate last year in which we heard about the appalling violence that was being carried out against the Rohingya people in Myanmar and about the disgraceful failure of the State Counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi, to act. She was a woman in whom I placed real hope and faith; she has now betrayed her nation and the most vulnerable in it.

The most horrific stories are still emerging, but I wish to share just two. Lukia is just 18. She grew up in Rakhine state with three sisters and one brother. Their father was a fisherman who took care of them all. Lukia was married just one week before her village was attacked. Some would say she was fortunate to be out of the house when the Myanmar military fired at it with a rocket launcher. Her family, brothers and husband were all killed instantly. She managed to escape the village and, after weeks of walking with other bereaved people, sleeping in tents with traumatised strangers, starving, she managed to join her sister and nephew in a refugee camp in Bangladesh. There, she at least has some rice and dal to eat, and some soap to get clean. But she cannot work, so she can do nothing except dwell on all that she has lost—the family and home that were so cruelly stolen from her. She still dreams of one day returning.

A man called Abul Basar has a similar story. He was also married at 18, and he sold betel leaves to support his wife. When the military entered the village two years later, he ran to a nearby hill to hide, because he knew that men of military age were often abducted or killed, as the UN reports confirm. From that hill, he saw the military take his wife and subject her to rape and torture. There were so many of them that there was nothing he could do. They put her in a house with 20 other women and burned them all alive. Abul said:

“‘The world went dark for me at that moment.’

He does not remember the journey afterwards—the trauma was too much for him—but he seems to have been carried by people from his village all the way to Bangladesh.

It is so hard to imagine the suffering that Abul, Lukia and the 900,000 others are going through. The Rohingya have already suffered so much, and the criminals who planned and perpetrated all this are getting what they wanted: ethnic cleansing. For those who do return to Rakhine state, the Government there are developing Rohingya-only settlements. They will not be allowed to return home. Amnesty International has called what is emerging “a vicious system of state-sponsored, institutionalised discrimination that amounts to apartheid”, and that is so true. There is no room for doubt about the scale of the persecution of the Rohingya, and there should not be any doubt about the intentions of those responsible.

In 2012, the Rakhine Nationalities Development party, the most powerful elected party in Rakhine at the time, was already preparing for genocidal violence. It spread an insidious message of hate, representing the Rohingya as terrorists and a threat to the Buddhist majority. In an official publication, the party used the example of Adolf Hitler to spread its message. The report explicitly said that “inhuman acts” are sometimes “necessary to maintain a race”, and called for a “final solution”. What an utterly terrifying thing for any Rohingya person to hear. The report went on:

“Although Hitler and Eichmann were the greatest enemies of the Jews, they were probably heroes to the Germans.”

Just this year, the Myanmar army published a pamphlet to justify the violence that said:

“Despite living among peacocks, crows cannot become peacocks.”

Dehumanising language, presenting an entire people as a threat, and praise for Hitler and the holocaust. I know the Minister will agree that there are clear grounds for an investigation under article 3 of the genocide convention—the crime of:

“Direct and public incitement to commit genocide”.

I really hope he will address that later.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow said, social media platforms played a huge role in the incitement. As the UN report says, for so many in Myanmar, Facebook is almost synonymous with the internet, and Facebook has proved to be a useful tool for spreading hatred in the build-up to each outbreak of violence. The site was used by individuals to post messages urging their friends to fight the Rohingya the way that Hitler fought the Jews, or advocating burning Muslim refugees “so that they can meet Allah faster.”
The UN report describes this as a “carefully crafted hate campaign” conducted by “nationalistic political parties and politicians.”—

and, heaven help us—

“leading monks, academics, prominent individuals and members of the Government.”

It was a campaign of hatred across all levels of society.

Facebook continues to host the page of the so-called Information Committee, apparently run from the office of Aung San Suu Kyi herself. The page shares propaganda posts denying the persecution of the Rohingya people. One particularly awful post smeared a woman who had dared to speak publicly about being raped. The words “FAKE RAPE” appear twice, in big font, at the top of the post. Facebook officials have conceded that they bear some responsibility, and they have now trained the post. Facebook officials have conceded that they have now trained the post. Facebook officials have conceded that they have now trained the post. Facebook officials have conceded that they have now trained the post.

"FAKE RAPE" appear twice, in big font, at the top of the post. Facebook officials have conceded that they bear some responsibility, and they have now trained dozens of content moderators who speak the Burmese language and banned various military figures from the site. It is a start, but we need social media platforms such as Facebook to take responsibility for their complicity in horrors such as this much earlier, ensuring that such content cannot be shared on their platforms. Facebook does need to take responsibility, but it is the Government and the military of Myanmar who are ultimately responsible for the evils that have taken place. Thankfully, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court has launched an initial inquiry into the violence against the Rohingya—I was not alone in asking for that last year. This is genuinely good progress, but we need to do far more.

In the debate last year, the Minister said that the responsibility lies with the Government of Myanmar and the security forces. He said that we should support the Government in following through on the promises made by Aung San Suu Kyi. But look at what is still happening. Look at the things that the security services of Myanmar would be a betrayal of Abul, Lukia and the hundreds of thousands of others who have suffered. It would not help end this horrific persecution, remove the people responsible from positions of power in Myanmar or secure justice for the Rohingya. So I would like the Minister to categorically rule out any military transfers and commit to a broad review of UK trade with Myanmar. We need to know that no aid money provided by this Government, and not one penny of profit from trade or investments involving UK companies, will reach the hands of those responsible for this genocide.

2.31 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I congratulate colleagues from across the House who have brought this important issue to the Chamber today. I know that the number of MPs here does not reflect the importance we put on this vital issue. I have visited the Rohingya refugee camps on the border of Bangladesh and Myanmar twice in my capacity as a humanitarian doctor. In doing so, I have had the ability to see at first hand the brutality and hear the accounts of what has been undertaken in Myanmar. I have had a career spanning more than 10 years working in the field of humanitarian medicine, and never have I experienced such atrocity.

Last year, when I first met refugees crossing the border, I saw the most brutal injuries and heard devastating first-hand accounts of mothers having their babies ripped from their arms and having to make the choice of whether to go and save one baby from a burning fire or flee with the children they still had remaining, in the vain hope of saving their lives. These are mothers whose children were murdered with the same knives then used to slice off their own breasts. There are sprawling camps, housing almost 1 million Rohingya; the scale has to be seen to be believed, and I know that many in the House today have seen that for themselves. There is a generation of children born out of rape, women who have been brutally violated and men who have had to carry their pregnant wife for 15 days, without food, often needing to drag them just to get over the border to safety. Meanwhile, the world has watched; meanwhile, we have watched.

In October, I returned to the camps and heard how, despite the uncertainty surrounding their futures, people felt relief at finally being able to sleep at night. It was so much easier for people to live in a camp, knee-deep in mud, with a family of eight sharing one little shack, but without the fear of imminently having their child snatched away and murdered. I spoke with Humaira, whose young son was murdered when the army stormed her village. She told me how she wanted to kill herself but was kept alive by the thought of trying to find his body to at least give him a burial. After two days of searching in vain, she had to decide between staying and losing her own life, or fleeing across the border, knowing that she was leaving her son's body somewhere to rot. She still lives with the pain of not being able to bury her son.

I then met Subaru, a 24-year-old mother, who spoke of how the military snatched from her arms her one-year-old child and hacked him to death right in front of her eyes. I know this does not make for easy listening, but these are the facts. We have seen this and heard this; this has been happening on our watch. I was in a room full of 30 women each of whom had a similar woeful, devastating story to tell. The guilt of coming home to my own three-year-old and five-year-old daughters left me unable to sleep at night, as I pondered what it must feel like to have to choose between your two children and for a moment accept that choice. No parent, wherever they are in the world, should ever have to make that choice, but that has been happening as the world has watched and as we have watched. Why should our children's lives be of more value than those of the Rohingya children, so brutally left for dead and slaughtered, without even a proper burial?

There are now plans to forcibly repatriate thousands of refugees, despite condemnation by the UN and despite their having escaped incomprehensible brutality. These refugees have already lived through the most intolerable cruelty. Just last month, refugees were fleeing camps in fear and others attempted suicide having been named on the list of 4,355 Rohingya refugees for imminent return, without their consent. Those repatriations have been halted for the time being, but they are due to start again in the new year. With the clock ticking, will the Minister confirm to the House that he will speak to the UK Government, as the penholder for Myanmar on the UN Security Council, have a real leadership opportunity, which we have to take.

One year ago, Rohingya refugees were still fleeing over the Myanmar border into Bangladesh. One year ago, Members in this House were debating the horrors...
faced by the Rohingya in northern Rakhine. One year ago, the Minister stated in this House that if the UN found evidence of genocide, he would support a referral to the ICC. However, just last month, he stated, in writing, that there is insufficient support among Security Council members for an ICC referral at this time. Just how much more suffering do the Rohingya people have to go through before the UK Government are forced to act? The debate is not concluded, yet we have already heard so many first-hand accounts, and I have witnessed these things myself. What more needs to happen? How is it possible that we are still witnessing the Rohingya face unimaginable horrors on a daily basis and uncertainty, yet the UK Government have not publicly spoken out against the forced repatriation of the Rohingya to Myanmar? Should the Rohingya not return to Myanmar, it is looking ever more likely that they face an uncertain future, with the possibility of relocation to Bhasan Char, a desolate island in the bay of Bengal, where communication with the mainland would be entirely cut off during monsoon season.

Many people would do anything to have our job, sitting in this place and making decisions that affect hundreds of thousands, if not millions of lives. We need to be able to look ourselves in the mirror in the twilight of our years and know that we did something with our position in this House. Sometimes that will call for bravery, sometimes it will call on us to take a chance and speak out for all that is right and good. We sit here today on the verge of Christmas and new year. I will be cuddling my children in the new year, but there are hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees for whom their children are but a memory. How can life have such different value depending on where a person was born? The Rohingya are crying out for justice. Humanity must have no borders. Will the Minister today please replace platitudes with promises of action?

2.40 pm

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for her excellent work in bringing this important debate to the House, and I thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) for her excellent work as well. This is a very important issue, and having listened to some of the speeches of my hon. Friends, I am feeling somewhat emotional over the trauma that the Rohingya people are going through. It is unbelievable in this day and age. I cannot believe that the international community has failed completely to help these people.

Only last month, buses and trucks stood ready to return refugees to Myanmar from the Cox’s Bazar refugee camp, but no one wanted to go back. There are 900,000 Rohingya in more than two dozen camps in the area, living in appalling and dangerous conditions. Food and medical facilities are poor, there is little or no access to education for children, and living conditions are dire. New arrivals are living in highly congested areas and are vulnerable to disease and starvation. There is no proper sanitation, there is insufficient water supply, and women and children are living with the threat of, or enduring, horrific sexual violence and trafficking.

As bleak and disturbing as this picture is, the prospect of forced repatriation to a dangerously hostile home country, stripped of rights and citizenship, is even worse.

The draft UN resolution aims to put a timeline on Myanmar allowing the return of more than 700,000 refugees, but all the evidence points to the fact it is not safe for even one refugee to return. It is an act of gross inhumanity that refugees still living with the trauma of horrific experiences are being forced back to a Buddhist-majority country that is still perpetrating genocide against the Rohingya people.

According to UN investigators, thousands of Rohingya are still fleeing to Bangladesh, and the estimated 250,000 to 400,000 who have remained following last year’s brutal military campaign in Myanmar continue to suffer the most severe restrictions and repression. Furthermore, according to reports from Reuters and others, the Myanmar Government are taking steps that threaten to make the purge of the Rohingya permanent. In August 2017, all 6,000 Rohingya residents of the village of Inn Din in Myanmar’s western Rakhine state fled a brutal army campaign. Rohingya Muslims and Buddhist villagers were once neighbours here, but Rohingya houses were burned to the ground and all trace of their lives there erased.

New satellite images show that the area was bulldozed and security buildings constructed where the Muslim houses stood. New homes have also sprung up, but not for the Rohingya. The new inhabitants are Buddhists, largely from other parts of Rakhine. The Myanmar Government’s resettlement maps show that Rohingya refugees returning to Rakhine will be herded into settlements that segregate them from the rest of the population.

The international community, including the British Government, has failed to take effective action to hold those responsible to account, address the root causes of the crisis and provide sufficient support to refugees. They cannot stand back and allow forced repatriation to a homeland where genocide is still happening. The British Government must accept in full the findings and recommendations of the UN fact-finding mission and officially accept that what took place is genocide, if we are to provide an adequate response to this appalling human suffering.

I welcome the Government’s leading role in humanitarian assistance for Rohingya refugees, but we must act now to improve security for women and children in the camps. The UK Government must take action through the UN Security Council to ensure that the Burmese authorities promptly bring suspected perpetrators of crimes against Rohingya to justice, including by referring perpetrators to the International Criminal Court. All the Rohingya refugees would like to return to Myanmar, but they cannot be expected to do so without guarantees of safety, citizenship and dignity.

2.45 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate, and I thank the hon. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and for St Albans (Mrs Main) for setting the scene so well. I also declare an interest. As chair of the all-party group on international freedom of religion or belief, it is an issue I am very interested in. Every time there has been a debate on the Rohingya, I have probably been there. I commend the hon. Ladies for their leadership in this area and the Backbench Business Committee for making this debate possible today. I am very aware of this issue.
I have spoken about it numerous times. I would love to say that I will not have to speak about it again, but, as everyone has said today, we probably will. We will probably be having this same debate this time next year. It would be great if things had improved by then. We wish and pray for that.

The reason for this debate is very clear. The humanitarian crisis has been described by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights as “a textbook example of ethnic cleansing”,

the UN Secretary-General has described the situation as “catastrophic”, and various NGOs continue to warn that the recent escalation of violence by Burma’s security forces against the predominantly Muslim Rohingya population constitutes crimes against humanity—those last words are all important. The UN special rapporteur for human rights in Burma has said that the situation has the “hallmarks” of genocide, while the independent international fact-finding mission established by the UN Human Rights Council claims to have documented evidence of genocide.

It has been over a year since these atrocities were perpetrated, and the international community has taken woefully—I say that respectfully—insufficient action either to bring them to an end or to bring the perpetrators to justice. The independent international fact-finding mission has called for a case to be brought to the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. All these things irk us, Right hon. and hon. Members have referred to much depravity and violence and brutal killing. It is very hard to sit through these things and not be moved.

As we work to secure the referral of a case to the International Criminal Court on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity, as recommended by the UN independent fact-finding mission, I believe we should seek a UN Security Council resolution imposing a global arms embargo on the Burmese army, with targeted sanctions against Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. May I ask the Minister—we are very fortunate to have a Minister of such standing, whose responses show such an understanding of this issue—to indicate what our Government, my and his Government, ha ve done on this?

A briefing I have received from the Burma Campaign UK states very clearly:

“Time is running out to address one of the most critical issues for addressing the root causes of the crisis, the denial of citizenship. Aung San Suu Kyi still refuses to accept Rohingya belong in Burma and should have citizenship. With elections due in Burma in 2020, there is now only a window of 12 months where it may be possible to repeat or replace the Citizenship Law. At the present time, Aung San Suu Kyi has the Parliamentary majority and political authority to push through a change. This may not be the case after the 2020 election. The British government and others must prioritise this issue, pressuring Aung San Suu Kyi to change the Citizenship Law in 2019.”

Hon. Members have all asked for it and I am asking for it, so I ask my Minister—our Minister—what has been done to ensure that that happens? We are ever mindful, as the Burma Campaign UK says, and I agree, that we have a “window of 12 months”, which is a very short time. While it is right and proper that we give the Brexit issue full attention, and it is consuming all our lives at the moment, we cannot and must not forget what we owe to the world out there, and especially to those countries with which we have had colonial connections in the past.

I was shocked to learn back in October that the number of Rohingya refugees has reached nearly 1 million, with the young girls in Bangladesh refugee camps sold into forced labour accounting for the largest group of trafficking victims. All these things are horrible to listen to. It is even more horrible to know that, despite the efforts of many, they continue. OM—Operation Mobilisation—reports that women and girls are lured into forced labour, and they account for two thirds of those receiving the agency’s support in Cox’s Bazar, while another 10% were victims of sexual exploitation. They have run from sexual exploitation, and they find themselves back in it. There must be something seriously wrong when that is happening. Men and boys are not exempt, accounting for about a third of refugees forced into labour.

There must be more support on the ground, and it is clear that we must call on the Burmese Government to allow unhindered access to the country for international humanitarian aid agencies, human rights monitors, the media, UN representatives of the fact-finding mission and the UN special rapporteur for human rights in Burma. Everyone has a role to play. This will, I sincerely hope, curtail the actions of those who believe that there is no law and no accountability for breaking any human rights violations.

A short time ago, I met Christian Solidarity Worldwide’s delegation from northern Burma, which gave us some horrific statistics about what is taking place. While it is completely understandable and right that the world has focused on the plight of the Rohingya, I want very gently to mention others. In no way should we detract from their plight, but the situation in northern Burma affecting the predominantly Christian Kachin, as well as the Buddhist Shan and Ta’ang and others, has deteriorated dramatically.

It would seem that, having achieved their objectives in Rakhine state, the Burmese army has moved on to perpetrate similar atrocities in northern Burma, while the world was still focused on Rakhine. The Burmese army, and all the officers that have been commanding it, need to be held accountable. If there is a war crimes tribunal, I can tell you, I will be the first in the queue to give them a good going over. What has taken place is absolutely despicable, and it really grieves me greatly.

In a statement on 23 April, the Kachin community warned of an escalation in Burmese army military offensives against the country’s ethnic groups. It stated that

“the Burmese military is escalating attacks against ethnic groups in the country, including in Rakhine State, Kachin State, Shan State and most recently breaking the ceasefire in Karen State.”

It continued:

“There is no shortage of evidence of violations of international law committed by the Burmese military.”

That has been outlined by other Members today.

Mrs Main: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that because nothing has really happened as a result of the atrocities against the Rohingya, the Burmese army is emboldened to do this? It would actually help support other religious communities in the country if they could see that these actions against the Rohingya were stamped on. The Burmese army is doing it because it knows it can, and the public quite welcome it.
Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is so right. This is the frustration we all have, and this is where we are. We have the frustration that the Burmese army is emboldened; because it has got away with it, it can get away with it again. I think it is time that we draw a line and make it accountable. The United Nations has been documenting these crimes for decades. There is another example: it just goes on and on. It is really time to draw a line and to tell these people, who think they are judge and executioner and that they can do whatever they want, that, no, they cannot. They will be held accountable for it some day.

A detailed assessment in 2016 stated that what may amount to war crimes were being committed in Kachin state and Shan state. The independent international fact-finding mission has concluded that crimes against humanity are being perpetrated in Kachin and Shan states. The judicial system has systematically failed to hold accountable perpetrators of abuses such as torture, forced labour, systematic rape and sexual violence.

According to Rev. Samson, by September 2018, 52 churches had been closed down and 92 pastors had been arrested. Further, in October 2018, the United Wa State Army—the UWSA—expelled a group of eight Catholic clergy and lay people from the Wa region in Burma’s Shan state. The UWSA has now said that all churches built after 1992 were constructed illegally and will be destroyed. It has forbidden the construction of any new churches, and five churches are reported to have been destroyed.

This demands action, and I believe that we must take it. I ask the Minister again to give serious consideration to actively ensuring that engagement with Burma on human rights and freedom of religion or belief does not focus entirely, with respect, on the plight of the Rohingya but to the exclusion of the Kachin and Shan people or of the Muslims, the Christians and other minorities throughout the country. Nobody is safe from the Burmese army; that is a fact. Will he also ensure that freedom of religion or belief is recognised as a priority for all the people of Burma and that we press for international accountability for the human rights violations that have been committed in the Kachin and Shan states?

At the very least, we have a responsibility to encourage the Burmese Government to repeal all legislation that discriminates against religious and ethnic minorities, including laws that limit religious conversion and interfaith marriage. In particular, the Burmese Government should change or repeal the 1982 citizenship law to allow the Rohingya full citizenship rights. That is the least that we can do for them and the least we can expect. We also need to do many other things, and we must use any diplomatic pressure that we have available. In the medium to long term, there must be investment to support initiatives to address racial and religious hatred in Burma. The hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) clearly illustrated that point. We need to support the voices of peace and moderation, and encourage a reconciliation process.

I am conscious of the time, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I shall conclude by pressing the Minister to take this case to heart. I have the greatest faith in him as a person, and also in his position as a Minister, as to how he will respond. Minister, every one of us is burdened with this—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I hope the hon. Gentleman will forgive me for interrupting him, but it has been my ambition during this year to persuade him to address Members of the House through the Chair. He has now, for the 124th time, addressed the Minister as “you”, and I have to admit my failure. I have failed during the whole year to persuade the hon. Gentleman, who speaks in this House every single day, to refer to the Minister as “the Minister” and to use the word “you” only when he is addressing the Chair. I feel a great burden of failure for not having persuaded him to do that during this year. I will start again next year, as I am determined to educate him in the ways of this Chamber. I beg him, please, to call the Minister “the Minister”, just this once.

Jim Shannon: Madam Deputy Speaker, it is up to me to grasp that terminology. I usually get carried away by the emotion of the occasion, and sometimes I let my voice follow what my heart is saying. Sometimes, inadvertently, that terrible word “you” comes out. The problem is that we are so involved with the EU at the moment, and sometimes I get the two terms mixed up. But there we are; that is by the way. I will endeavour to achieve what you ask.

At this time, Minister, we have a heavy burden in our hearts for the Rohingya, for the Christian Kachin and for all the states in Burma and across the world. I believe that we in this House have a responsibility to act, and act we must. I look to the Minister to outline what form this action will take and when it will take place. We need a timescale. In her introduction, the hon. Member for St Albans mentioned the fact that we were debating this issue this time last year, and indeed we were. We are back again now, but I am not sure how much further forward we are. There are hundreds of thousands of people looking towards us and praying for relief, and if it is in our power to grant that, we must do so. If it is not, we must still do all that we can to exorcise those whose gift it is to enable people to return home and to live and worship as they see fit.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I pay tribute to the work that he does in the all-party group for international freedom of religion and belief. Perhaps I could even say, “Well done, you”—but perhaps not.

I congratulate the hon. Member. Members for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and for St Albans (Mrs Main) on securing the debate. It is a sombre and reflective end to the term, but, nevertheless, a very important opportunity to remember, as we go off on the Christmas break, that the seasonal message of peace, hope and joy should be not just aspirational, but motivational, as we remember those who will not enjoy the comforts that many of us are looking forward to, and, of course, that includes the refugees and the Rohingya people. I also echo the point made by others that, on another day, the Benches would have been considerably fuller. That applies to the Scottish National party Benches as well, and I speak on behalf of all my hon. Friends in this debate.

The House has considered this issue several times since the first evidence of the crisis. I remember, very soon after the 2015 general election, the hon. Member
for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) leading an Adjournment debate on the issue. He had also drawn the attention of the House to the issue in January of that year in Westminster Hall. Those debates were the straws in the wind, as it was becoming apparent then that the initial high expectations of democratic reform and the forthcoming elections were perhaps too high, and that there would in fact be trouble ahead. That has been reflected in the powerful contributions that we have heard in all the speeches today, especially from members of the International Development Committee who have travelled to the area. They include the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) who has had first-hand experience of the area, and the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) who gave a very powerful and moving account.

I just want to reflect briefly on the situation on the ground, some of the international responses and the role for the UK Government. We have heard those testimonies throughout the debate. Since 2017, and indeed before, there has been a brutal state-sponsored oppression of the Rohingya people in Rakhine state—mass murder, rape, abuse, destruction of villages, certainly a form of ethnic cleansing and now very clear ground to consider whether a genocide is taking place. We heard other moving stories from the hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) in that regard.

More than 800,000 Rohingya people have already fled to Bangladesh, with women and children accounting for at least 80% of those refugees. The point was well made by the hon. Member for St Albans about the need to continue to raise awareness and public understanding so that this issue does not get lost. I pay tribute to my old friends in the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund and in Justice and Peace Scotland who, this year, commissioned the photo exhibition, “The Journey”, which has been touring Catholic cathedrals and other venues in Scotland, bringing home the harrowing reality of the refugee crisis and the experience of the Rohingya people and ensuring that they are not forgotten. I also join the tributes that have been paid to other non-governmental organisations working in the area. Christian Solidarity Worldwide and the Burma Campaign in particular provided very helpful background for this debate.

There may now be a pretence of calm and an attempt to keep the lid on the situation, but it is clear that things remain precarious, that oppression continues, and that any attempt by Bangladesh to force repatriation on the refugees could once again lead to an escalation in violence.

It is important to recognise some of the responses from international actors. There is a widespread humanitarian response in operation. Last year, the Scottish Government contributed £120,000 from their humanitarian emergency fund. The First Minister said:

“The Scottish Government has made clear that we support the UN Secretary General’s call for effective action that addresses the root causes of the situation and brings an end to violence. We also stand ready to support the UK Government in providing an appropriate response to this situation...The Scottish Government expects all states to comply with fundamental and human rights law, to condemn human rights abuses wherever they occur, and to take positive action to confront abuses and to bring practical day-to-day effect to human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

We support the EU and US actions and sanctions on individuals in the Myanmar military, including the European Council’s recent decision to adopt individual sanctions against Myanmar’s senior military and border guard officials for alleged human rights violations. The US has also adopted such sanctions, but, clearly, there are calls in this Chamber and from elsewhere that they could be stronger and more effective. I also note the decision of the US House of Representatives to agree a resolution that the Myanmar Government’s actions constitute genocide, and perhaps that does need further consideration here in this House.

It is clear that further support is needed for the authorities and responders in Bangladesh. It must not feel that it has to forcibly repatriate the Rohingya refugees—a point on which the Chair of the International Development Committee spoke very powerfully. There are some estimates that suggest that barely half of the required funding has actually been met. Likewise, the refugees must be treated with respect for their human rights and under humanitarian principles. The reports we have heard of prison-like accommodation and significant overcrowding in camps are simply unacceptable.

I echo the calls for careful management and regulation of social media. The comparison has been drawn with the situation in Rwanda. I had the privilege of travelling there with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association earlier this year, and the legacy of that genocide is still incredibly raw 25 years on. We keep saying that this must never happen again, yet here we are on the verge of it happening again. We have to respond and take action, which is why this situation should be among the highest priorities for the UK’s diplomatic efforts.

We have a long historical relationship with Burma/Myanmar and we should be using our influence with the country’s Government and on the world stage. It is therefore disappointing that the UK Government have chosen not to accept in full the findings and recommendations of the UN fact-finding mission, and it is clear from this debate that there has to be further and full consideration of whether the violence against the Rohingya people constitutes genocide. I echo the calls of the hon. Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) that the Government must completely and unequivocally condemn what is happening.

As others have said, it would be useful to hear from the Minister an update on efforts to build support for a legal tribunal, whether that is a referral of the regime to the International Criminal Court or the establishment of an ad hoc tribunal to consider the situation. There are other steps that the UK and its agencies could take to more effectively enforce sanctions—for example, by making sure that procurement by the Department for International Development or the embassy does not source goods or services from military-owned or controlled companies in the country.

As others have alluded to, the sorriest part of the story is the fall from grace of Aung San Suu Kyi. She had been such an inspirational figure to so many people. As I have said previously in Westminster Hall debates, I grew up hearing about her house arrest and the inspiration she provided. When she was released, she was feted here in this House, but now the civic honours are being stripped from her, including the freedom of the cities of Dundee and Glasgow. But she still has a crucial role to play, and could redeem her reputation and her Government, if she was willing to acknowledge the mistakes that are being made and take whatever steps she can to bring the army under control. The first and most important thing
she must do is to recognise the rights of the Rohingya people to citizenship in their own country. That message is coming very strongly from this debate and from the international actors, and it must come strongly from the UK Government too.

This time of year is about hope. We must have hope, but we must take responsibility for bringing that hope to fruition. That message is coming strongly and clearly from this House in support of the UN’s findings, and the Government must use their resources and influences to build peace and seek justice for the Rohingya people of Myanmar. On that note, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and everybody in the House and around the world—including the people of Myanmar, Bangladesh and the Rohingya communities—a happy and peaceful Christmas.

3.7 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) and the Backbench Business Committee on securing this important debate. At the beginning of her speech, my hon. Friend drew our attention to the motion before the House, and I am going to begin in the same way:

“this House is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis...agrees with the findings of the UN fact-finding mission that genocide and war crimes have been carried out...calls on the Government to pursue an ICC referral...and further calls on the Government to put pressure on the United Nations.”

The fact of the matter is that we are not going to divide the House this afternoon. This is a substantive motion. It means that the Government, having accepted it, must carry through in full with action.

My hon. Friend made an excellent speech, in which she pointed out that the UN fact-finding mission has found that genocide and war crimes have been committed. I thank her for her work in not only securing the debate but visiting the refugees, preparing so thoroughly and putting pressure on the Myanmar Government. As she said, half the refugees are children, so the horror and catastrophe of this situation cannot be exaggerated. She said, as other Members have, that she was disappointed that the Rakhine State Commission, which was established in 2017, was not present.

The fact of the matter is that we are not going to divide the House this afternoon. This is a substantive motion. It means that the Government, having accepted it, must carry through in full with action.

Mrs Main: The hon. Lady is referring to the memorandum of understanding signed between the two countries. It is worth putting on record that there was no voice for the Rohingya in the dialogue on the memorandum of understanding. They were being talked about, done to and organised around, but they did not have a voice at that negotiating table.

Helen Goodman: I am grateful for the hon. Lady’s intervention and she is absolutely right. She made a powerful speech. Through their work and actions, she and the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) have demonstrated that there is a consensus across the House on this matter, to which we want Ministers to listen and pay attention. She asked, what would be different in December 2019 and why should we wait for the independent commission of inquiry, because this is surely a recipe for delay and the loss of evidence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who chairs the International Development Committee, made an excellent speech in which he emphasised the problems with repatriation and the conditions in the camps. He stressed the importance of enabling people in the camps to work and secure an education. He pointed out that this problem will not be solved quickly, and we need to borrow from best practice in other countries in order that these people do not become a lost generation.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, who is the Select Committee’s rapporteur, gave us the benefit of his deep and long-standing understanding and emphasised that the Rohingya themselves must have more control in this situation. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) demonstrated that gender-based violence is not the result of an army out of control but is being used as a systematic weapon of war. He expressed his frustration with the position that the British Government have taken. He talked, in particular, about children born in the camps. There is a question for the Minister flowing from his remarks: what is the legal status of these children? It would be very helpful if we could have a clear legal view from the Foreign Office on their legal status, because we are clearly talking about thousands of young children. My hon. Friend also pointed out that relying on the internal state to provide security for the Rohingya people is completely inadequate.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) talked about the catastrophe suffered by two people, in particular. As so often, the horror is easier to understand when one hears about individuals than when one hears about thousands of people. She also pointed to the propaganda war that has been run over a long period. Will the Minister consider what the legal responsibilities are of the social media companies? What, precisely, are the responsibilities that we should be attributing to Facebook—and, incidentally, has it given any money from its huge profits to address this vast humanitarian crisis?

My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) spoke about the atrocities that have occurred. Her testimony was so powerful that I really feel that I...
do not want even to begin to comment on it. She ended by saying that we need to move from platitudes to promises, and I completely agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) pointed to the most recent evidence that has come out of the country. All hon. Members have said that the treatment of the Rohingya is obviously the most horrific act of the Myanmar Government, but a number of things are going on in the country that show that it is not open or properly democratic. The Government made a strategic error when they jailed two Reuters journalists, because now Reuters is using satellite photography that shows that villages are being bulldozed and new people are being put into them. That reinforces the case that hon. Members are making that, when the Myanmar Government say that people should go back into Rakhine state, they mean that they are just going to be put into camps—enclosed, not given freedom of movement. That, in itself, is a completely unacceptable and unsafe situation. They are continuing to oppress the Rohingya people and they are suppressing open reporting.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief, made a heartfelt call for improvements across the board in Myanmar. I agree with him about what is happening to the Chin people. I was extremely alarmed—again, I would like some answers from the Minister on this—when I heard on the World Service that the UNHCR was proposing to send back people from that ethnic minority who are currently refugees in Malaysia, India, Thailand and Nepal. So I wrote to the UNHCR to ask it about this. I wrote for two reasons, partly out of concern for that group of people and partly because it sets a terrible precedent for the Rohingya minority. I had a letter back from the UNHCR at the end of November, and it said that the reasons giving rise to a fear of persecution under the 1951 convention have very significantly diminished. I will share the letter with the Minister afterwards, but I would like to know whether that is also the Foreign Office’s assessment. I do not think it is the assessment of hon. Members, not least because we have seen the Rohingya people continuing to cross the border throughout the year.

The big question, of course, is, what should be done? What should we do now? The Government are telling us that they think we should allow the Burmese Government to carry on with the process they call a commission of inquiry. The UK Government want to press them to make improvements across the board. We know there are travel restrictions on individuals, to that part of the economy controlled by the military. We know there are travel restrictions on some of the Myanmar military, but we do not know—again, this is a specific question for the Government—what assets have been frozen so far.

Imran Hussain: My hon. Friend makes a powerful and compelling case. On military personnel travelling, she will know that, soon after the initial escalation in violence in October 2016, red carpets were rolled out in Italy and other countries in Europe for the military generals in April 2017. That is outrageous and any sanctions must start with the top personnel, not the generals.

Other hon. Members have talked about sanctions, and we now have individual sanctions against some members of the Myanmar military. However, two further strengthenings would send helpful and powerful signals. Unless we put more pressure on the Myanmar Government, they will feel that they have some impunity. The first point is to have a UN-mandated global arms embargo, and I would be interested to hear what the Minister thinks about the scope for that. The second point is to extend European sanctions, which at the moment are on individuals, to that part of the economy controlled by the military. We know there are travel restrictions on some of the Myanmar military, but we do not know—again, this is a specific question for the Government—what assets have been frozen so far.

Helen Goodman: I did not know about that episode, but my hon. Friend makes a fair point. Ultimately, as everyone in the Chamber understands, we want the implementation of the Kofi Annan report, and full recognition and civil rights for Rohingya people within Myanmar.

To be honest, there could not be a better day for this debate. Hon. Members will recall that two days after Christmas day we remember the slaughter of the innocents, so it is therefore apposite for us to be considering this issue. Hon. Members and people watching the debate also know that Christmas is a time for giving, and having heard the powerful testimonies from my colleagues, I hope that those watching who feel moved to do so, know that to give to the Rohingya refugees via Save the Children they can telephone 0207 012 6400, or go online to www.savethechildren.org.uk/rohingya.

Her Majesty’s Opposition believe it is now time to have a UN Security Council resolution referring the Myanmar military to the ICC. When the Minister wrote to me a few days ago, he said that that would lose and that it would not advance the cause of accountability should the UNSC try and fail to refer Burma to the ICC. I do not think for a single moment that that is an easy judgment to make, and nor do I think any Member would think that, but we need to look at where we think the opposition to such a resolution would come from.

First, of course, there is the risk of a Chinese veto. As part of its belt and road initiative, China is currently trying to build a port in Rakhine state. China is continually arguing that the Rohingya are an internal issue. That is clearly because China wants to have a good relationship with the Myanmar Government so it is able to continue with its belt and road initiative, and in my opinion it is also because China does not want people looking too closely at how it is treating the Muslim Uighur minority in the west of China.

We are also beginning to see an undermining of the ICC by the Trump Administration. John Bolton, the US national security adviser, recently said that the ICC is “dead to us”. He does not want the ICC to prosecute US army officials for alleged abuses in Afghanistan.

The question is really whether the British Government wish to hand over their moral conscience to the Chinese and the Trump Administration. Would it not be better to be open and straightforward by standing up for what we believe and letting them be tried in the court of public opinion?

To be honest, there could not be a better day for this debate. Hon. Members will recall that two days after Christmas day we remember the slaughter of the innocents, so it is therefore apposite for us to be considering this issue. Hon. Members and people watching the debate also know that Christmas is a time for giving, and having heard the powerful testimonies from my colleagues, I hope that those watching who feel moved to do so, know that to give to the Rohingya refugees via Save the Children they can telephone 0207 012 6400, or go online to www.savethechildren.org.uk/rohingya.
Madam Deputy Speaker, I think I will be the last person from this Dispatch Box to have the opportunity to wish you, other hon. Members, and the staff of the House, a very happy Christmas.

3.27 pm

The Minister for Asia and the Pacific (Mark Field): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate, and to Members for their heartfelt and emotional contributions. One difficulty of standing at this Dispatch Box is that although I have heard the poetry, there may now be a little more prose as I try to give a realistic assessment of what is achievable. As we know, politics is to an extent the art of the possible, but it is also the art of aspiration, and I hope to touch on a few issues that have been raised. I shall try to respond to all the points raised, but I hope hon. Members will forgive me if I revert to writing to a number of specific points. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) will accept that it is better I do it that way, rather than try to give a glib answer that then begins to unravel.

I take this opportunity to commend on the record the political violence that we have seen in Bangladesh in recent days, which has, and will have, a big bearing on these matters. Whenever I visit Bangladesh, I am struck—as I am sure other hon. Members are—by the absolute determination of its people to get on and prosper, and we all know that political instability and violence will not help them to do either of those things. Much can be said, of course, for many in the British-Bangladeshi diaspora.

I am concerned by reports that some civil society organisations in Bangladesh are being prevented from observing the election. Independent domestic and international observers have a crucial role in helping to support a free and transparent process for the elections in 10 days’ time. We urge all in Bangladesh to refrain from further violence, to deliver a democratic election, to give Bangladeshi a properly representative Parliament that can propel their country to greater economic prosperity, and—to reflect the words of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—to reflect on their ongoing responsibilities for the situation in and around Cox’s Bazar.

I now turn directly to the subject of this impassioned debate. The plight of the Rohingya people rightly concerns many hon. Members—many more, perhaps, than are in the Chamber today. Like me, several colleagues have made the journey to camps in Bangladesh to meet refugees and heard their distressing testimony for themselves. When I travelled to Cox’s Bazar in June, I could see the immense scale of the suffering. The refugee situation is heartbreaking; notwithstanding the immense generosity being shown to them by the Government of Bangladesh, who have given shelter to nearly 1 million people. Those whose hon. Members spoke to said that they wanted, in time, to return to their homes in Burma, but only if they could be certain that they would no longer be persecuted and discriminated against.

I very much agree with the sentiments of the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali), we absolutely oppose plans for moving any Rohingya to Bhasan Char, the island in the bay of Bengal. We do not feel that that would be a safe or feasible place, for the reasons that she set out. Any location or relocation of refugees has to be safe, dignified and in accordance with international humanitarian principles, standards and laws.

As colleagues will know, the Governments of Bangladesh and Burma were preparing to start a refugee repatriation on 15 November. I spoke as a matter of urgency by telephone with Bangladesh’s Foreign Minister and I spoke with both the Bangladeshi State Minister of Foreign Affairs and Burma’s Minister for International Co-operation in advance of that day. I was absolutely clear with each of them that the UK Government shared the assessment of the UN Refugee Agency: that insufficient progress had been made to enable safe returns to northern Rakhine.

Our concerns were also borne out by the fact, brought up by many hon. Members today, that no Rohingya refugees volunteered to return. I believe that international pressure at that point was a key factor in halting any involuntary repatriations. I welcome the Bangladeshi Government’s subsequent reaffirmation of their commitment to exclusively voluntary returns, but we all know in the international community that we will have to remain vigilant about that point.

I can reassure Members that the UK will continue to play a full part in supporting Rohingya refugees as a leading donor to the international humanitarian response, to which we have so far donated £129 million.

Dr Allin-Khan: It is great to hear the Minister affirming that we do not want any forced repatriations and acknowledging that Rohingya refugees want to return only if that is safe. On my most recent visit just two months ago, the word coming out from the refugees was that they wanted justice. Does the Minister agree that the issue is about not just safe repatriation but bringing about justice for all the atrocities that those people have had to live through?

Mark Field: I do understand that. What justice amounts to is obviously something that will develop in time, as and when, one hopes, people are able to return to traditional homelands. That is something I am sure we will discuss.
Mrs Main: Just before the Minister moves on from his point about Bhasan Char island, I met the new Bangladesh high commissioner to the UK this week. This is a narrative I have heard before. They do not regard Bhasan Char island as a bad place to go. Indeed, they say that they are encouraging their own people—Bangladeshis—to apply to Bhasan Char island and that it will not just be an outpost for Rohingya. My concern, however, particularly with the monsoon and so on, is that it is a very secretive environment, so we need to stress that we do not consider Bhasan Char island in that way. I know that this is a point of dispute. I would like to put it on record that the Bangladesh Government do not see Bhasan Char island as a bad place to be.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend’s previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is $654 million out of a $950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend’s previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is $654 million out of a $950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend’s previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is $654 million out of a $950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend’s previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is $654 million out of a $950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend’s previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is $654 million out of a $950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend’s previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is $654 million out of a $950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend’s previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is $654 million out of a $950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Mark Field: We have made it clear that we do not feel it is an appropriate place, for the reasons my hon. Friend rightly sets out. Out of sight is out of mind. There is a sense of it being almost like an Alcatraz or near enough some sort of holding pen, rather than a viable place for the longer term.

On my hon. Friend’s previous point about the joint response plan, which goes to the issue of the overall humanitarian response, I am afraid to say that at the moment, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby will know, it is only partially funded. The current figure is 68.9%, which is $654 million out of a $950 million expectation. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.

Ultimately, we all know that the solution to the Rohingya crisis lies in Rakhine and in Burma more widely. The UN fact-finding mission—we are supportive of it and its evidence—uncovered evidence of a series of horrendous crimes. Its report makes for chilling reading. The UK is, mainly through the international community in Geneva rather than New York, actively encouraging others to step up to do their share in fully funding the plan, including through DFID’s relationships with other donors and donor agencies.
counterproductive to our aims, because it would reduce pressure on the Burmese military, and would also undermine the very credibility of the United Nations.

I know that some look back at China’s decision to abstain rather than vetoing the UN Security Resolution in 2005 referring the Darfur situation to the International Criminal Court. I believe that we should test what China is prepared to accept in this situation, but I also think we need to recognise that the way in which that nation behaved in 2005 in relation to a crisis in Africa may not be the way in which a China that is rather more assertive on the international stage behaves in relation to a crisis in its own neighbourhood.

Mike Gapes: The Minister says that China’s interests in that part of Africa were not necessarily what its interests are in Myanmar. Is it not a fact that the Chinese Government sees this region as essential to its belt and road strategy and its overall expansion of its investments, and therefore regards neighbouring countries as a strategic asset? Is it not very likely that the Chinese will continue and therefore regards neighbouring countries as a strategic asset? Is it not very likely that the Chinese will continue to prove very difficult in the United Nations on this matter?

Mark Field: I fear that they will. There are the strategic and economic issues to which the hon. Gentleman has referred, and there is also—this was mentioned by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland—the sense of a non-interference strategy. To be fair, they believe that across the board in the context of sovereignty, but obviously there are issues closer at hand in regard to which there has been public criticism, and that will, I suspect, increase in the months and years to come.

I would like to think that we will continue to try to work within the UN, and that we should try to table a resolution if the opportunity arises, but I am trying to be as open as possible with the House about some of the fundamental strategic difficulties that we face in trying to table a resolution. Although I understand that there is a real sense of outrage, and a feeling that we need to be on the front foot, it might well undermine what we are trying to achieve in the short to medium term in building some sort of consensus among like-minded international states.

Imran Hussain: The point the Minister makes about the Chinese veto somehow emboading the Burmese military further is lost on me, because the Burmese military at the moment are acting as judge, jury and executioner: anybody who thinks there is an ounce of real democracy in Burma is kidding themselves. The military have all the key seats, including, as the Minister knows, the Home, Foreign and Security Offices. If we do nothing, that will surely emboade the Burmese military further.

Mark Field: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and he will appreciate that these are very sensitive decisions that we are making on the international stage. I know that this debate will be read not just in Burma, but in the UN as well, where our group there will try to make some headway on the issue.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Field: I am taking rather longer than I intended, but this is an important debate and I wanted to take some interventions. However, I want now to come back to my speech.

Let me also say this very specifically about China’s actions at the moment: China’s forcing of a procedural vote as recently as 10 October to try to prevent the fact-finding mission from even briefing the UN Security Council. I highlight, I fear, the level of opposition we are currently up against. But we shall continue to try to engage China on the need for accountability for this horrendous set of crimes, and our strategy of course is not constrained to the UN Security Council; we secured agreement as recently as 10 December at the Foreign Affairs Council to expand the EU’s Burma sanctions listing. Seven senior military and border guard police officers were sanctioned by the EU in June for their roles in human rights violations in Rakhine in August and September 2017. We shall be adding more names to that list and expect to announce details early in the new year. These measures and their signal that the international community will take further steps to increase the pressure are noticed and are not welcomed by the Burmese military or indeed the State Counsellor.

Of course human rights violations continue to occur elsewhere in Burma, as has been mentioned by a number of Members. In the last few weeks three Kachin activists were convicted of defamation and sentenced to six months in prison for organising protests in which they were alleged to have criticised the Burmese military. Our ambassador had met them only a few days earlier, and both he and I have publicly protested at that sentencing.

The fact-finding mission report also highlighted that atrocities had been committed against both Kachin and Shan state minorities, and I heard some of the horrifying evidence for myself.

Dr Allin-Khan: I am sorry for intervening as I appreciate that the Minister has a limited amount of time in which to speak. However, I feel that I cannot sit here in silence while listening to the continuation of the debate without saying that the Minister has so eloquently spoken of the atrocities against a number of other minority groups unfolding as we sit here ready to go on our Christmas recess. I am proud to be British and proud to be in this Parliament, and we have a duty to call out all that is wrong globally. We sit here talking about this knowing full well that atrocities are continuing. When are we going to stand up, be counted and not be fearful of what the countries around Burma are going to be saying to us?

Mark Field: We are standing up in New York and in Geneva on a daily basis and being counted on this very issue—trying to take a lead. The Kachin and Shan issue is not an isolated example. This goes back to the issue of our being penholders, and one can look back through history to 1824 or 1945, but one of the desperate things is that those minorities fought on our side during the war while the Burmese Buddhist majority sided with the Japanese, and that is one of the reasons why we have an historical moral and ethical imperative. A number of those minorities have been considered as beyond the pale and not as citizens partly as a result of that episode; essentially that was seen as somehow being against the moves for Burma to have independence from the United Kingdom.

With the House’s indulgence, I will touch on two more points. I will write to Members on some of the specifics, because I would rather not say anything inaccurate. With regard to family reunion for refugees, I believe
that the Home Office has written to the hon. Member for Bradford East, stating that the UK Government strongly support family unity, and that the Home Office has a comprehensive framework in place for refugees and their families. He made a good point that the refugees in Cox’s Bazar clearly cannot go to Dhaka anytime soon to exercise those rights. He made the point on the Floor of the House, and I will do my best and will write to the Home Office to make clear his concerns.

Imran Hussain: I am grateful to the Minister for allowing me at least to put this on the record. For months now I have been seeking to meet the Home Office in order to deliver hundreds of applications or information sheets that I have received from constituents who have relatives in Cox’s Bazar, first so that the Home Office has that valuable information, and secondly to see whether anything could be done. However, the Home Office is refusing to meet me.

Mark Field: I am sure that was a rather mischievous intervention from the hon. Gentleman, but because it is Christmas we will let him get away with it. But he makes a serious point.

Let me touch on the issue of sexual violence, which was raised by a number of Members. The hon. Member for Bishop Auckland asked about the legal status of children in camps. I will write to her, because I need to consult the FCO’s legal advisers to be absolutely clear about the precise nature of that. As many Members will know, we have worked very closely and played a leading role with our advisers on sexual violence in Bangladesh. We have a team of experts trying to map and document human rights violations, partly for the longer-term development of evidence, but obviously also to try to train up Bangladeshi expertise in this regard. Clearly that is an important part of our ongoing work in the camps.

DFID is very much leading the way in supporting a range of organisations that provide specialised help to survivors of sexual violence in Bangladesh, including 19 women’s centres offering a safe space, psychosocial support and activity for women and girls. At the last count, 53,510 women have been provided with midwifery care and advice. We also support projects in Burma as part of the preventing sexual violence initiative, including publishing guidance on support for survivors in a formal legal process.

In conclusion, we all know that the Rohingya people have a right to live in their home country in safety and with dignity—something we take for granted at this time of the year. For that to happen, those responsible for their persecution must be held accountable, and the Burmese state must show that it is serious about bringing an end to prejudice and discrimination against ethnic minorities who have suffered for so long. Burma will also continue to need the support of the international community if we are to see democracy, human rights and the rule of law embedded in that country for the longer term.

As things stand, we must prepare ourselves for what I fear will be a very long journey. We must remember that the Burmese people will have to endure every step of that journey, given the Government they have. That is why I will repeat today what I have said before: for their sake, the UK will stay the course so that one day the people of Burma can live together in peace, justice and prosperity.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to the debate. I repeat the offer that my door will remain open on the issue. One of the frustrations in the 18 months of so that I have been a Foreign Office Minister is that there are certain matters—I was going to say “easy wins”, but nothing is easy in diplomacy—that land on my desk and in relation to which I can achieve something in very quick order. I have spent a huge amount of time working on this issue, as a number of Members have been kind enough to point out. Perhaps I do not share the passion or anger shown by some Opposition Members, but I share their concerns and wish that I could achieve more. I wish that I could say that we had been able to achieve a huge amount in the international community. Sometimes, as I have said on the Floor of the House before, one of the frustrations and challenges of being in the Foreign Office is that we take two or three steps forward and then take a couple of steps back. We have made progress and a lot of work is going on, not only among my team in the Foreign Office but in New York and Geneva, and particularly in Dhaka, Rangoon and Naypyidaw, where we have our high commissions and embassies.

The truth of the matter is that this issue is very tough. It is one of those issues that is not open to a rapid solution. I wish it were. It breaks my heart: I am a father of two children and, not least at this time of the year, one recognises the conditions in which many Rohingya live, and not just for the past 18 months, because many of them have been living in those conditions for decades. We have to be in it for the long haul. The UK Government and, more importantly still, in many ways, the UK Parliament is in it for the long haul.

I thank everyone for what they have done. As I say, my door remains open and I will try to ensure that as the situation develops we speak to as many Members with strong concerns about this matter as we can. Work is in progress, and although there is not a great deal ahead in 2019, I feel that we are taking a number of tracks, and hopefully we will not only have accountability and improve the humanitarian opportunities for those living in Cox’s Bazar, but work with international partners to try to look properly to the longer term. As many people say, the issue in that part of the world is not just about the Rohingya today; it is about the precedent that is being set. Although we can never say never again, and they always seem like such hollow words, that is the real prize here. If we can do something and bring together an accountability process that is a precedent for the future, a lot of the very hard work on this matter that goes on, not only in the UK Foreign Office but in several other countries, will not be in vain.

3.56 pm

Rushanara Ali: Let me start by expressing my gratitude to my hon. Friends and other Members, especially my co-sponsor the hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), for taking time to contribute to this debate ahead of Christmas. Everybody has spoken passionately and with conviction and courage about the importance of the need for the British Government to act, and we have highlighted our own experiences of why we need to act. I am grateful to the Minister for the work he has been doing and for what he has said.
Let me sum up and reiterate some of the points made by my hon. Friend and Members in all parts of the Chamber. The first is the importance of the reform of citizenship laws and the protection of all minorities—especially the Rohingya population, given the scale of the disaster, but also other minorities, including Christian minorities. There are conflicts throughout Burma that affect humanitarian access for other minorities, such as the Kachin.

Along with its humanitarian dimension, the particular focus of the motion is the need to seek an International Criminal Court referral through the United Nations. The Minister highlighted very well the complexities of getting such a referral, and we understand them, but we need to remind ourselves of some of the remarks that have been made, including “If not now, when?” If the Minister is not prepared to say when, for the reasons that he has explained—we fully appreciate the complexity and difficulty of international diplomacy—will he please make the commitment that he, and perhaps even the Foreign Secretary, will regularly report to the House, without our having to spend months trying to secure a Backbench debate that then gets delayed because of the wider crises that we face in this country, particularly given the uncertainties of Brexit and a potential no-deal situation?

The point about the referral and accountability and justice is well made and important. We are particularly passionate and determined that this foreign affairs team—the current Foreign Secretary, with the Minister and his colleagues—take action, because they have shown the greatest commitment so far. That includes the Foreign Secretary’s recent visit to Burma and his discussions with some of us before and after that. I am grateful for the time that has been given to involve Members of the House. This team has shown the most commitment to getting such a referral, and we understand them, but we need to remind the Government of its commitment and understanding, we need action. Otherwise, we will keep coming back here to remind and re-educate subsequent Ministers, not because they do not care, but because they are having to learn fast, as this Minister had to do when, as a new Minister, he stood in this Chamber to respond to an urgent question when this crisis began. That is why we are absolutely determined to ensure that the Government take much stronger action and report back—every few months, I hope—with some results, rather than have us go round in circles.

The points on the issues relating to protection, particularly of women and children, are well made. I urge the Minister to make sure that DFID does more and that we do more to ensure that the outstanding funding is provided for the appeal, because without medium to long-term funding, the hand-to-mouth existence is going to cause further devastation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned the Jordan compact as a way of learning what else could be done and supporting host populations, as has been the case in Jordan in respect of Syrian refugees. It is important that DFID and the Foreign Office explore those options. On the conditions in the camps, the International Development Committee highlighted the 200,000 people who would have been at risk if landslides had taken place as a result of flooding and cyclones. There is a real risk that that could happen next year. I know from spending the first seven years of my life in Bangladesh that the climate is very difficult, so I hope the Minister will do more with the Department to ensure that more support is provided.

I want to thank all the international and domestic non-governmental organisations that have supported the efforts, both in Rakhine and in Bangladesh. I particularly thank the Burma Campaign UK and Refugees International, which first took me to Burma when I was a newly elected MP, in very challenging circumstances. I also thank the faith organisations—the mosques, synagogues and churches—which have raised so much money; British nationals have raised so much money and shown so much generosity. I echo the appeal made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) for people to donate ahead of this Christmas to support people who are struggling to survive. I thank all of my colleagues for giving their time and sticking with this very important issue, because genocide cannot be taken lightly. That is why we must act.

I wish to thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for indulging us, and me in particular, in allowing me to speak for a bit longer than two minutes. I wish you a very happy Christmas, and I wish all colleagues, especially my co-sponsor, a very happy Christmas and new year.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Lady for her good wishes. I have allowed speeches to take rather longer than they ought to have this afternoon because this is a very difficult subject, and some powerful and impassioned speeches have been made. It breaks my heart to think of the way in which this Chamber and this Parliament are criticised for what happens for half an hour a week, given that for the other 40 hours of the week that we sit here in this Chamber and this Parliament we do some very good and important work. I am grateful to everybody who has taken part in this debate this afternoon, and I only wish that those who observe us would look now and see how positive and beneficial this Parliament is to the nation and indeed to the world.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House is deeply concerned by the ongoing humanitarian crisis facing Rohingya refugees; agrees with the findings of the UN fact-finding mission that genocide and war crimes have been carried out against the Rohingya by senior Myanmar military figures; calls on the Government to pursue an ICC referral for Myanmar through the UN Security Council; and further calls on the Government to put pressure on the United Nations to prevent the repatriation of the Rohingya from Bangladesh to unsafe conditions in Myanmar and continue to provide assistance to Rohingya refugees.
4.4 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I realise that the House has just been debating a very important subject, so I will not be offended if my hon. Friends leave the Chamber, despite my debating a very important issue for my constituents. I wish them on their way out a very happy Christmas and a prosperous new year.

The Source drop-in health centre is a nurse-led centre on the Horn Park estate in my constituency. It was opened in a partnership between the local council and health service under the single regeneration budget early in the 2000s in recognition of the unique situation of the Horn Park estate and its residents and the need to improve access to health services. The council provided a shop premises at a peppercorn rent, round five of the SRB paid for the refurbishment, and the NHS provided the staff and equipment.

The Horn Park estate is among the 20% most deprived communities in England, according to the index of multiple deprivation’s latest figures, for 2015, and ranks 5,591 out of 32,844, which actually makes it one of the 18% most deprived. The estate is largely made up of council-built housing, and residents are mostly council and housing association tenants. It is located at the south-west edge of the Royal Borough of Greenwich and borders directly the London Boroughs of Lewisham and Bromley.

Being on the periphery of three boroughs always puts the community at a disadvantage when it comes to public services, as was recently highlighted by Professor Tony Travers of the London School of Economics. To the north, the boundary of the estate is marked by the A20 Sidcup dual carriageway and the A102 south circular, a similar dual carriageway. The community is therefore very isolated from its neighbouring communities in the Borough of Greenwich.

There is a small parade of shops that used to include convenience stores, a chip shop and post office. The post office moved into the convenience store, but that has now virtually completely closed, and there is now just the chip shop. An attempt was made to put in a satellite Sure Start centre in one of those shops, but that has since been closed, and the Source occupied one of those other empty shops in the middle of the estate. For everything else, the residents have to leave the estate, and there are many elderly people and families with young children on the estate, and 30% of them do not have access to a car.

The Horn Park estate lost its only GP practice in 1990, when Dr Denis retired. I remember campaigning to keep the practice open at the time. The Greenwich district health authority, which was then in charge of the health service in Greenwich, decided that the practice at Horn Park should be taken over by the Evans practice, based in Court Yard, central Eltham, over one and a half miles away. The Evans practice closed Dr Denis’s satellite surgery on the estate and never provided any services locally. This was the beginning of a trend of gentrification in the location of surgeries, as a succession of GP practices closed surgeries based on council housing estates.

I have several communities in my constituency among the most deprived in England on the index of multiple deprivation. The Page estate, made up of four communities, is among the 20% most deprived, and the Middle Park estate, made up of three communities, has one among the 10% most deprived. The Brook estate is among the 30% most deprived. Lower Brook estate is among the 40% most deprived and the Horn Park estate has two communities among the 20% most deprived. With the exception of one community on the Page estate, they all have one thing in common: they do not have a GP practice.

When the clinical commissioning group closed the Source in 2016, it decided to invite expressions of interest from GPs in Greenwich to establish a branch surgery on the site as a replacement for the Source. No GPs stepped forward. In an attempt to justify its decision, the CCG claimed that there were six GPs within a “manageable distance”—less than 1 mile—from the Source’s location in Sibthorpe Road. In fact, there are no GPs less than 1 mile’s walking distance away. The nearest is actually 1 mile away, and the rest are more than 1 mile away—up to 1.5 miles away. There is no pharmacy on the estate, and the nearest one is 1.5 miles away, in a direct walk, at Newmarket Green on the neighbouring Middle Park estate. However, that is not a suitable walk for anyone with mobility problems or for a parent with children.

If the CCG truly wants to tackle health inequalities in Eltham, it could start by making services more accessible in the communities where they are most needed. It is unacceptable that it is possible to walk to five different practices within ten minutes in the most affluent area of my constituency, while the Greenwich CCG says that it cannot afford to keep a nurse-led service available on the Horn Park estate. Before its closure, the Source was dealing with over 5,000 patient visits per year, at an average cost of £26 per visit. This compares with £45 for the average cost to visit a GP, and over £80 for a visit to an A&E. These facts were completely disregarded by the GPs on the CCG when the decision to close the Source was made.

The Source was closed in 2016. Greenwich CCG’s then chief officer explained that Greenwich CCG was forced by NHS England to reduce its planned spending by £15.5 million by March 2017. Closing the Source, she claimed, would save £75,000 a year. The total CCG budget for Greenwich in 2016 was just under £370 million.

The opposition from the local community forced the CCG to hold a consultation. I attended it with my constituents as, one after another, they stated how they valued the support, advice and treatment they got from the nurses at the Source. Each and every one of them told the CCG that it took at least three weeks to get an appointment with a GP. Rather than be concerned about this fact, the CCG just told the residents of the estate that they were completely wrong about the waiting times for GP appointments.

Further misinformation was circulated by the CCG to justify its decision. It suggested that the nurses at the Source lacked the necessary qualifications to prescribe or sign prescriptions. Oxleas NHS Foundation Trust, which employed the nurses at the Source, has confirmed that this was not correct, and that the nurses were in fact qualified as independent prescribers.
[Clive Efford]

The CCG’s determination to close the Source generated such overwhelming opposition that it was forced to commission a report from the Picker Institute about the use of primary care services and the Source. This report concluded that

“the Source is a highly valued service”

by the local community. People were very positive about the wide range of services offered, the convenience and ease of getting an appointment, and the friendliness and approachability of the staff. The report found that local people were very concerned that local needs would not be met if the threatened closure was carried out, and that existing GP surgeries would be even more pressurised as a result. The report also found that GPs themselves recognised the value of the Source in relieving the pressure on their practices.

The report quotes a local resident saying:

“When you need to see a practice nurse quickly at my GP surgery, they just say—go to The Source”.

Another resident said:

“Receptionists are the ones sending people to the Source.”

Another said that

“within Sherard Road surgery there are posters up signposting people to attend the Source”.

In fact, most GP surgeries in the area had posters advising people to use the Source. The report also found that ease of access and the ability to be seen on the day were very popular with local people, especially those with young children and the elderly. The Horn Park estate has many elderly and vulnerable residents. It is among the 30% most deprived areas in England for income deprivation affecting older people, according to the 2015 indices of deprivation. One resident explained:

“As a carer I find it easier to get my mother to the Source in her wheelchair than taking her all the way to Eltham on and off buses as I do not drive.”

Many residents complained of having to wait three weeks for a GP appointment.

The Picker Institute took a month to compile its report, which was published in September 2016. It clearly showed that the Source was a highly valuable local facility, providing a vital service for local people, but that was not what the CCG wanted to hear. The day before the Picker report was published, it confirmed its decision to close the Source without even bothering to wait for the results of the consultation. The CCG announced the immediate closure of the Source and stripped all of the equipment out of the building.

In its 2016-17 annual report, the CCG acknowledged that

“as commissioners we have ambitious aspirations to put patients, carers and local people of Greenwich at the heart of our commissioning. We recognise that we have fallen short of our aspirations this year, especially on some of our work to reduce our expenditure as part of the Quality, Innovation, Prevention and Productivity programme, e.g. on decommissioning the Stroke Association and the Source as well as our plans to commission a musculoskeletal service where our consultation was very limited. We know that we still have a long way to go to improve our patient participation activity.”

The issue here is what the words mean. If that is what the CCG believes, how is it that it is not listening to patients about the Source? The CCG claimed that 80% of the work carried out by the Source fell outside the CCG’s delegated authority—for example, sexual health. It said that the three nearest GPs in Greenwich offer nurse-led services and encourage patient participation in the same way as the Source. It said:

“There are also pharmacists close by:”

None of that was accurate.

In 2016, NHS England and the CCG finally acknowledged the healthcare needs of the estate and the harm that the closure of the Source would cause. Moreover, the CCG recognised that Horn Park should be “considered as an exceptional case”.

because of the “inaccessibility of general medical services for this deprived community, isolated as it is by its unique geographical location”.

While opening a new branch surgery was “not in alignment with the GP Five Year Forward View or the Greenwich CCG Estates Strategy, with their direction of travel towards larger and more sustainable general practices”, this was not, according to the report, “sufficient reason to set aside” the accessibility issues. That is the conclusion of the South East London Commissioning Partnership Group.

I also want to draw the attention of the Minister to a couple of reports that bear out the case for the Source. The Primary Care Workforce Commission found that nurse-led surgeries could mitigate the effects of GP shortages, helping “address workload issues, improve the patient experience and sometimes deliver savings.”

That was published in 2015. In 2010, the King’s Fund talked about those surgeries supporting the value of continuity of care and patient experience showing improved patient outcomes and job satisfaction and professional development of the staff involved. It pointed to the fact that the quality of the service that the Source provided not only improved the health outcomes for the patients who use it, but gave greater job satisfaction, which, in turn, fed back as a valued service that the patients enjoyed. I can vouch for the committed staff who ran the Source and pay tribute to the excellent relationship that it had with the local community. This is how local health services should be delivered.

Since the closure, I have continued to receive complaints from residents on the estate about poor access to health services. In response, I recently consulted with local residents. We delivered a survey and introductory letter to every door on the estate that was on the electoral register—991 in total. We asked people either to complete the paper copy and return it to our freepost address or to complete it online, and we received over 200 responses, which is a response rate of over 20%. I am sure that the Minister will acknowledge that that is a very high response rate for a campaign of this sort. I also organised a petition calling for the Source to be reopened in Horn Park that has so far garnered nearly 700 signatures. Somewhere in the region of 900 local people have called for the centre to be reopened. Given that 1,964 people in Horn Park are on the electoral register, this means that something in the region of 45% of all adults on the estate have put their names forward to support this campaign.
The survey received 201 completed responses and 690 individuals have signed a petition calling for the Source to be reopened. Some 98% of respondents agreed that the Source must be reopened, 85% of respondents that had used the Source now find it more difficult to access health services, and 80% of respondents who had previously used the Source now rely on their GP to access the services previously provided by the Source. Over half—53%—of those who indicated how they used the Source accessed four or more different services at the centre. Some of the comments from the survey speak loudly in favour of reopening the service. Those remarks included:

“Advice close to home. If unwell no need to travel into Eltham for GPs getting an appointment can take a few weeks”,

“Reopened Source should provide all of the previous services (it can now take up to three weeks for a GP appointment)”,

“I would be happy with any walk-in service” and

“Reopen the Source. Older people really need it”.

We need more facilities like the Source, not fewer.

On Second Reading of the Health and Social Care Bill, Andrew Lansley said, in response to Andrew George, the former MP for St Ives:

“He will see that, in the Bill, a specific duty is placed on the commissioning board and each commissioning consortium to reduce inequalities in access to health care. He will see also that, through the Bill, we will strengthen accountability where major service change takes place, because it will require not only the agreement of the commissioning consortium, representing as it were the professional view, but the endorsement of the health and wellbeing board, which includes direct, local, democratic accountability.”—[Official Report, 31 January 2011; Vol. 522, c. 610.]

The health and wellbeing board of the Borough of Greenwich is in no doubt that the Source should reopen. I pay tribute to the leader of the council, Danny Thorpe, who has committed to keeping the premises available so that we can do just that.

Reinstating the Source would address many of the objectives raised in the NHS plan such as staying healthy, ageing well, tackling clinical priorities and enabling improvement. It would also align with priorities in the Greenwich joint strategic needs assessment and would put tackling health inequalities back at the heart of this very isolated community. The CCG has acknowledged that Horn Park has “unique geographical characteristics”, and should be considered “as an exceptional case” because of the “inaccessibility of general medical services”.

It accepts that there is a “substantial case” to treat it “as an exception to the current direction of travel towards larger practices.”

The distances to local GPs were described by the CCG in 2016 as “a manageable distance (around a mile or less)”, but this is not the reality, and 85% of respondents who had used the Source said that they found it more difficult to access the health service after the centre’s closure. How is that improving healthcare? Forty-five per cent. of people on the estate have expressed support for it reopening. How is it possible to continue to ignore local residents and the health and wellbeing board about reopening the Source?

The Government claim to be putting £20 billion into the national health service. Surely some money can be found for this community that can go directly to delivering the health outcomes that the Government say they want to achieve.

In wishing the Minister a happy Christmas and a safe journey home, I ask her to join me in making a new year’s resolution to impress upon Greenwich CCG that it should reopen the Source and restore the health services that the community on Horn Park estate in my constituency so desperately needs.

4.25 pm

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): I thank the hon. Member for Eltham (Clive Efford) for securing this important debate and for the characteristically strong and comprehensive way in which he has brought this matter to the House’s attention. He always stands up for his constituents, and this evening is no exception.

This Government are committed to providing high-quality services, commissioned by clinical commissioning groups and NHS England on a local, regional and national basis. Ultimately, we want to continually improve health outcomes for individuals, communities and society as a whole. We believe that GPs, working with other healthcare professionals, are best placed to co-ordinate the commissioning of high-quality care for their local patients.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about the Source in Horn Park with great knowledge. I totally recognise his concerns about the decommissioning of the drop-in centre in 2016, and I understand the importance of people having access to services near their homes. From what he says, it sounds like this service was well valued and well used, and the location of the estate poses unique challenges to people being able to access the services they need. Equally, that is always balanced against the provision of the right services of the best possible quality. My understanding from the CCG is that its decision to decommission the Source was part of a range of actions taken to ensure that it continued to make high-quality services available to the residents of Horn Park and reduce duplication. Greenwich CCG says that, since closing the Source, it has expanded the range of services available to residents of Horn Park. That includes opening a GP access hub clinic at Eltham Community Hospital, which is located within 2 miles of Horn Park. The GP access hub is open seven days a week, with appointments available from 8 am to 8 pm on weekends and on weekday evenings until 8 pm. Patients can book appointments through any Greenwich GP at a convenient time that suits them. Overall, the CCG says that it provides an improved quality of service for local residents. Unlike those seen at the Source, patients who attend that hub will be seen by a Greenwich GP who has access to patient records. The GP will have vital information on long-term conditions, allergies and vaccinations, improving the quality and safety of care.

It should be noted that Eltham Community Hospital already offers a broad range of high-quality services to the people of Greenwich, including walk-in blood tests and walk-in X-rays. It also provides public health services, including long-term contraception and help with smoking cessation. Alongside that, we are always keen to promote local pharmacies, which are on hand for a range of
services, including advice on various issues and flu vaccinations free of charge, but I note that the pharmacy on Horn Park estate has also shut.

I understand the hon. Gentleman’s position. The Source was a much-valued local facility, and there are always concerns when a well-used and well-loved facility closes and clinicians decide it is time to move to a different model, although it is right that decisions about local health provision should be made at a local level. I understand his concerns about access to services. The CCG informs me that a local bus service—the B15—connects Horn Park estate with all three Greenwich GP practices and Eltham Community Hospital.

I have heard the hon. Gentleman’s concerns about how the CCG has engaged with local residents and how it did—or, in fact, did not—listen to their views. I would like to be very clear that the Department does expect commissioners to engage properly with their communities before making any decisions on this level of service change. I am pleased to hear that the CCG has now agreed to facilitate and promote a further meeting on Horn Park in January 2019 with the hon. Gentleman and with ward councillors. I hope that that will be a good opportunity for him to raise what sound like some very valid concerns and to seek alternative options to present the evidence that he has collected in his petition and his survey. I very much look forward to hearing the outcome of that meeting and I hope that they will be positive for his area.

More generally, on 21 November, the Prime Minister announced £3.5 billion of funding for primary and community health care a year, in real terms, by 2023-24 under the long-term plan for the NHS. She also committed to grow spending on primary and community healthcare as an overall share of the NHS budget. As part of the development of this plan, we will be talking to system leaders, patients and other experts to understand how we can overcome certain challenges, like the one that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, in a sustainable and positive way. In the meantime, I do very much recognise his concerns and thank him very much for bringing them to our attention. I hope that his meeting with the local CCG proves to be fruitful and very much look forward to hearing its outcome.

As the last speaker from this Dispatch Box this year, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I take this chance to wish you, your team, the Clerks, staff and security a very merry Christmas—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I am sorry to stop the hon. Lady when she is giving good wishes, but I think the hon. Gentleman might like to intervene. He does not have a right to speak again, but I am sure that the Minister will give way if he wishes to intervene.

Clive Efford: Yes, just briefly. I would like to stress one point. Horn Park is an extreme example of how health services have moved away from the most deprived communities. There is an issue about accessing health services. These are the communities that are most distressed and most in need of having direct access to those services. If the Minister ever has an opportunity to talk to Greenwich CCG, will she bear that in mind when she does so and draw it to its attention? I think we could improve our health outcomes a great deal if we were to address that issue.

I wish all those who serve us here in the House a very happy Christmas.

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point, and I will of course raise it in any conversation that I do have with Greenwich CCG. He is absolutely right to say that we should be doing everything we can to close the health inequalities that people experience up and down our country.

May I, Madam Deputy Speaker, wish you a very merry Christmas and a happy, healthy and peaceful new year?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you. As we approach the Adjournment of the House for the Christmas recess, I would like to thank everyone who works in this building, and in Parliament generally, who supports Members of Parliament in all the work that we do. We could not do without the Clerks, we could not do without all the other people who work here, and we certainly could not do without everyone in the Tea Room. I particularly wish a happy and peaceful Christmas to all Members of Parliament on all sides of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

4.33 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 10 December 2018

[PHILIP DAVIES in the Chair]

Palm Oil

4.30 pm

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 219758 relating to the sale of products containing palm oil.

I was hoping for and expecting a bigger turnout for the debate, because a lot of colleagues mentioned to me how passionate they were about the subject. However, I think other events may have overtaken us. Also, I beg forgiveness: my voice has only just returned, so I may have to cut my remarks short to ensure that it lasts the whole three hours of the debate.

Palm oil is an edible vegetable oil derived from the fruit of the oil palm tree. It can be found in a range of household products, from foods such as pizza and chocolate, to cosmetic products, including leading brands of shampoos and lipsticks. In recent decades, global demand for products containing palm oil has increased substantially. The World Wide Fund for Nature estimates that palm oil is present in as many as 50% of packaged products purchased in the UK each week.

The debate is taking place in response to a petition calling for a ban on the sale of products in the UK containing unsustainably sourced palm oil. It was created by Jessica Wilkinson after she watched the BBC documentary series “Orangutan Diary”, which was first broadcast back in 2007. Support for the petition skyrocketed after Iceland’s initial tweet presenting the video received more than 92,000 retweets and 100,000 likes, and the advert has been viewed 5.6 million times on Iceland’s YouTube channel.

Clearcast, the body responsible for clearing adverts on behalf of the four major commercial broadcasters, ruled that the advert was not suitable to air. That actually helped bring attention to this cause, because the advert was viewed millions more times than it would have been had it not been banned. I thank Clearcast for bringing attention to the debate, which I will use to highlight a number of issues about the impact of the palm oil industry on biodiversity, the wider environment and human life in affected areas, and what we legislators can do to improve the situation.

On animals, oil palm trees can be cultivated only in tropical climates; consequently, rain forest environments across regions of Asia have become prime locations for palm oil production. Areas of Latin America and west Africa also contribute to global production, with Indonesia and Malaysia in particular becoming the world’s main exporting countries; they alone account for as much as 90% of the world’s oil palm trees. These areas are some of the most species-rich habitats on the planet, and the implications of palm oil production for animals there are devastating. The jungles of Borneo and Sumatra are home to thousands of unique animal species, and are the only place on earth where certain species of tigers, rhinoceroses and pygmy elephants can be found.

The orangutan has suffered the greatest impact. A 2015 United Nations Environment Programme report said that Bornean orangutans face extinction due to the unsustainable rates of deforestation across the island, while the International Union for Conservation of Nature now describes orangutans as critically endangered. A scientific study published in Current Biology indicated that in the past 16 years, more than 100,000 of these beautiful creatures—more than half their overall number—have died as a direct result of deforestation due to palm oil. Many other species are also affected by these developments, including the sun bear and the clouded leopard.

On the environment, deforestation for the purpose of planting oil palm trees has substantial implications for the future of climate change. In Indonesia and Malaysia alone, the area of forest cultivated for growing oil palm trees and palm oil production has increased from 2.6 million hectares in 1990 to more than 15 million hectares in 2014. One of the most direct consequences of that is the damage done to the environment through the increased emission of greenhouse gases. The general consensus, arrived at on the basis of scientific evidence and fact, is that tropical forests account for the storage of approximately 46% of all terrestrial carbon on earth.

Consideration must be given to the environmental impact of the production process, and the emissions associated with plantation management and mill operations. One of the most effective methods of deforestation of the tropical jungle is burning down trees and replacing them with oil palm plantations. Equatorial Asia alone accounts for more than 10% of all global emissions caused by burning vegetation.

That brings me neatly on to the effect on people. Those fires have severe consequences for human life; air pollution is a major problem across the region. In 1997 alone, hospitals in Singapore recorded an increase of as much as 30% in hospital admissions for haze-related conditions. Haze events occur as a direct consequence of extensive forest fires. In 2015, Malaysia and Singapore experienced the longest haze event on record, which lasted as long as three months. A 2017 European Commission study estimated that those countries may have experienced more than 100,000 excess deaths in 2015 alone, as a direct consequence of that event.

Secondly on the industry’s effect on people, there has been a rising number of disputes over land ownership. Several cases have been reported of large palm oil producing companies being given preferential access to areas of land over indigenous populations, who have been displaced despite their long-standing generational and cultural ties to the area. That has been a global issue, with cases documented in Malaysia, Papua New Guinea, Cambodia, the Philippines, Nigeria, Liberia, Cameroon and Colombia. Specifically in Indonesia, its national land bureau estimates that disputes relating to the palm oil industry in 2012 alone accounted for as many as half of the country’s land conflicts.

Finally, the industry, while providing employment for many people and being a huge part of local economies, has been connected with alleged exploitation of child and forced labour for the purpose of profiteering. The
United States Department of Labour lists palm oil produced in Malaysia as a product of forced labour; in Malaysia, Indonesia and Sierra Leone, the industry also exploits child labour.

As legislators, we need to ask what our response to this issue should be. It is important to remember that criticism of industry in and of itself is not universal. It is a vital component of the economies of those countries, and the livelihoods of many people are supported and maintained by the production and export of palm oil and associated goods. Academics and anthropologists have suggested that a total ban on all products containing palm oil, such as the one implemented by supermarket chain Iceland, may in fact be detrimental to addressing the damage that unsustainable palm oil production causes. They argue:

“Environmentally conscious consumers should demand palm oil from certified sources, but avoiding it altogether runs the risk of putting pressure on other crops that are equally to blame for the world’s environmental problems.”

In fact, Greenpeace has argued that it is not opposed to palm oil in and of itself. The solution has to be to look at how, specifically, we can reduce the impacts of deforestation, and consequently support more sustainable approaches.

WWF has been in discussions with me about the recommendations that it has put forward: first, to work with the private sector to address the deforestation risks in its global supply chains—the Government should consider demanding high environmental standards in any future trade deals with countries across the world that are harvesting palm oil—and, secondly, to bring forward an environment Bill that sets out a strong legal basis for the recovery of our environment and the reduction of our global impacts.

I have described the impact that unsustainable palm oil has on animals, the environment and people, and how legislators and the Government could proceed. It is clear that greater global effort must be made to end the practice of producing unsustainable palm oil, so I would like to put some points and questions to my hon. Friend the Minister before I conclude. First, although the Government have made considerable progress in relation to ensuring 100% sourcing of credibly certified palm oil, there is still progress to be made. That is despite the excellent work that the Minister has been doing, so can she outline when the 100% threshold is likely to be met? Secondly, what steps are the Government taking to build on the work of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil and encourage those nations to address the issues associated with unsustainable palm oil through international aid, diplomatic measures and other tools that Governments have at their disposal? Thirdly, how are this Government highlighting the commitments of countries to create reductions in greenhouse gas emissions under the 2015 Paris climate change agreement, and highlighting how that can be achieved in short order?

I say to the Minister that there is support for the Government taking action to ensure that this vital industry is sustainable for the long term, and to protect animals, the environment and the people around the world who rely on it. We will never be forgiven if we allow the extinction of more species on our watch. I look forward to hearing from the Minister what more the Government can do.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I express many and sincere thanks to the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) for securing this debate on the sale of products containing palm oil, and congratulate him on getting through his speech.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to such an important discussion. He has much more in-depth knowledge than me, although I am glad to have this opportunity to speak on an issue that is becoming more and more apparent in everyday life. What comes over loud and clear is that, for the planet’s sake, we must say no to palm oil. At a time when it is more important than ever to protect our environment, we have a widely used substance that is directly linked to catastrophic deforestation, habitat degradation, climate change, animal cruelty and indigenous rights abuses in the countries in which it is harvested.

As a highly versatile conditioning agent, palm oil is the world’s most commonly used vegetable oil and roughly half of all packaged products in our supermarkets contain it, yet most people will have little idea of how it is produced. I believe that palm oil could be described as “the new plastic”, because of the damage that its production and everyday use do to the environment. Phasing it out will be a victory in the fight to save our rainforests and to protect wildlife—in particular, orang-utans and Sumatran tigers, both of which are endangered species. It is estimated that there are only about 400 Sumatran tigers left in the wild. Both those wonderful species are put at needless risk through the production of palm oil.

The production of this substance epitomises all the worst things that humans are doing to the planet, and I hope that we are beginning to take notice. I applauded the frozen food retailer Iceland for its stance: it is committed to phasing out palm oil from 130 of its own-brand products until such time as there is a reliable global certification scheme that prevents deforestation. What struck me about this issue is the need to raise public awareness of it. That is why high-profile campaigns such as Iceland’s are crucial. It encouraged people to sign a petition on the use of palm oil. This petition was a worthy one to sign, as we can all see from the amounts of correspondence that we have had from our constituents.

As consumers, we can help to stop palm oil expansion by sourcing products that do not contain this substance and we must continue to put pressure on the companies that use it. Research by YouGov in March 2017 found that although 77% of respondents had heard of palm oil, there was a huge lack of clarity among the majority of people on whether it was being produced sustainably. Although palm oil may be all around us in everyday products, consumer awareness of its impact on the environment is scarce.

Some digital tools are being produced to allow shoppers to avoid palm oil or choose brands that use oil from certified sources—a huge step in the right direction. One example is the World Wildlife Fund palm oil buyers scorecard. On the awareness front, we can only applaud a company such as Iceland for its pledge to ban products with palm oil from its stores, but we need more big brands and suppliers to follow its lead. Last week, I met representatives of Waitrose at Westminster and I
brought up the subject of palm oil in its products. Although it is doing everything it can to produce a reliable supply chain and it is making strides, it still has concerns about where it sources its goods from. Additional good news is that the Norwegian Parliament has voted to make Norway the world’s first country to ban its biofuel industry from importing this substance, starting in 2020. Green campaigners have celebrated that move as a victory but, as the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate said, there is still much more to do. We are at a pivotal moment and we must strike now.

Thanks to respected environmentalists such as David Attenborough—I hope we find another one very quickly—there is a willingness to take conservation very seriously. As we have touched on today, palm oil is a vegetable oil extracted from the fruit of oil palms and used in everything from food to cleaning products and fuel. By the way, I do not mean that there is anything wrong with David Attenborough; I just think that we need more people out there. He is doing an awful lot of work on his own and I think that he needs the support of many other people. I know that, on the ground, there are people coming through. I think that we need to promote them more and more, to get the message out.

The oil palm is mostly grown in Africa, Asia and North and South America. Thank goodness that in January 2018 the European Commission decided that the use of palm oil in biodiesel was to be phased out and banned as of 2021. Indonesia and Malaysia have voiced great displeasure, as this has been a huge market and banned as of 2021. Indonesia and Malaysia have been the world’s largest producers, producing 85% of the world’s palm oil. The EU is one of the world’s largest importers. As of 2018, half the EU’s palm oil imports were being used for biodiesel. Such has been the outcry that the Malay Government lobbied the UK Government to oppose the ban, threatening to withdraw arms orders from UK companies. I think that I am right in saying that the Malay Government lobbied the UK Government to oppose the ban, threatening to withdraw arms orders from UK companies. I think that I am right in saying that since the ban was announced, the UK has been lobbying for a planned EU-Indonesia trade deal. Perhaps the Minister can comment on that later.

Meanwhile, companies such as Unilever, the world’s largest palm oil buyer, use it for pharmaceuticals, chemicals, animal feed and processed foods and ingredients. It is looking into a sustainable palm oil strategy for its entire supply chain, which of course is good news. It plans to source all its raw palm oil from sources that meet RSPO certification standards, or standards that have been verified as equivalent by an independent third party, by 2019. That is crucial; it must be done by more companies and done in a hurry.

Cargill is, I believe, a company that uses palm oil in animal feed and processed food ingredients. It is an early member of the RSPO and implements a full supply chain sustainability plan with the help of The Forest Trust. Meanwhile, Fairtrade palm oil production has begun. There is a non-profit collaboration between stakeholders from the palm oil industry, and environmental and social non-governmental organisations, to develop and implement global standards for sustainable palm oil.

While it is good that the palm oil problem is being looked at and ways forward discussed, we must ensure that there is no room for companies to find a way around green safeguards. The RSPO certification scheme has been criticised for its loopholes. For example, forest areas can still be cleared so long as they are not designated “high conservation value forest,” but the definition is far too vague and subject to interpretation. Companies can also buy sustainability credits, which let producers of unsustainably produced oil sell it as sustainable if they contribute towards an agricultural training fund. About 21% of the world’s production was covered by this arrangement in 2017. In addition, the EU is the only market where certified oil has been in high demand. Most of the oil produced is consumed in Asia.

Other hurdles include the risk that focusing on palm oil alone will only drive manufacturers to use other edible oil sources that are just as bad. Like the EU biomass ban, it could also send a message to producers that there is no point in adopting sustainable practices. This is a complex situation and difficult conversation, but we must face up to it. It urgently needs our attention and a solid plan to combat the assault on our planet. It must be brought to public attention that everyday choices made while shopping have a much wider impact. The message to producers must be that the mass use of palm oil cannot continue as at present, and a greener way must be found for the good of us all and future generations.

The world wants to change. More young people than ever are engaged in green issues, but we, the decision makers in this place, need to continue to raise awareness and make demands. We must never assume that big companies will adhere to doing the right thing. I look forward to the Minister’s reply.

4.51 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I congratulate the hon. Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) on his excellent speech. I agreed with much that was said by the hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally). I welcome the debate engendered by this e-petition, and congratulate its proposers and everyone who signed it.

We have heard plenty of evidence that the amount of palm oil being produced is increasing, the amount of land used for its production is increasing, and the amount of deforestation taking place is increasing, and the environmental, biodiversity and health effects of that deforestation are increasing. If we care about having an area of rainforest the size of a football pitch cleared every 25 seconds in Indonesia alone; if we are at all troubled by the race to extinction of the orangutan and a whole host of other creatures, some of which are probably yet to be identified; if we are sickened by the bullying, intimidation and violence that are driving inhabitants off their land, and poisoning their water and their air, we must first ask ourselves what we can do differently.

Whatever regimes and arrangements are currently in place to attempt to ensure that palm oil comes only from sustainable sources, and whatever the various reports from various bodies might say, the evidence is there in plain sight that the depredation on the world’s rainforests continues. We can all be delighted that in 2012, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs pledged to work towards 100% UK sourcing of credibly certified, sustainable palm oil by the end of 2015. However, while the Government’s response to this e-petition claims that “substantial progress” has been made—there is a fairly impressive list of declarations...
signed and commodity user groups set up—I do not think that the Minister will try to claim that all the palm oil used in all the products consumed in the UK is currently sourced from genuinely sustainable palm oil plantations.

Palm oil is by far the most prevalent form of oil in processed foods in this country. Many people and organisations would like to campaign for a total ban on all palm oil in this country. Those of us who have had the opportunity to watch the advert promoted by Iceland as part of its decision to rule out palm oil would feel moved to agree as an initial reaction, but under the present circumstances it would not be feasible to halt the production and use of all palm oil, at least in the short term. There does not appear to be conclusive evidence that palm oil cultivation is inherently more damaging to the environment than any other crop. Serious, in-depth analysis of the total sustainability of various cultivation regimes, in order to identify which practices in the cultivation of palm oil are more damaging than others, would help to achieve more sustainable international agriculture.

It is certainly not the case that deforestation is the only reason why palm oil might have an unacceptable effect on the environment. I am certain that those who are campaigning against all use of palm oil will not be satisfied with any so-called sustainable palm oil accreditation that is not based on scientific and objective measurement of all the possible detriments that palm oil cultivation might involve.

The current definition of sustainable palm oil is based on the standards and criteria laid down by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. That body has over 400 members, the majority of which are from the palm oil industry—businesses involved in the import of palm oil or businesses involved in the sale of products that contain palm oil—as well as banks and other organisations that are investors in the palm oil industry. So far as I can tell, of the 400 members, only five have no vested interest in the continuation of the palm oil industry. I am not suggesting that the Roundtable is not genuine in its concerns about the environment or that its definition of sustainability is not motivated by a deep concern for the environment, human rights or the biodiversity of our planet, but I am certain that some considerations have not been made, because those organisations that would have been able to consider them, including scientific bodies that monitor environmental detriment, have not been involved. However genuine the concerns of the RSPO might be, environmental campaigners who are opposed to the use of palm oil will not believe any definition of sustainability that emanates from such a body.

I have a few questions for the Minister. What more have the Government done to try to reach the 100% goal, which was laid down by DEFRA to be achieved by 2015? What plans does her Department have to reform the RSPO or to set up an additional body to produce a definition of sustainable palm oil that might command the respect of campaigners and the general public? How can her Department ensure that an effective, independently-led and scientific audit trail is done of the current sources of palm oil consumed in this country, rather than relying on the assurances of those who have a vested interest in giving assurances? Will her Department investigate the effectiveness of other nations’ adherence to their promises, so that we can determine where the responsibility for the continuing destruction of our rainforests lies?

The Government say that they wish to halt deforestation by 2030. The world is not even going in the right direction. Following the current trend, if deforestation does halt in 2030, it will be because there are no forests left to deforest.

4.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Thank you, Mr Davies. It is a pleasure to respond to this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate (Luke Hall) on leading this debate on behalf of the 89,802 signatories of e-petition 219758. The Petitions Committee was generous to grant a debate on a petition that did not meet the threshold of 100,000 signatures.

We have heard some good points about the unsustainable trade in palm oil, its links to deforestation, and the associated loss of habitats and species. I want to make it clear that the Government are absolutely committed to taking the action that is needed and to showing the required leadership to support business, Governments and civil society to tackle deforestation and the associated impacts on some of the most iconic species and habitats on Earth.

Between 1990 and 2015, it is estimated that the world’s forest decreased by an area equivalent to 11 times the size of England. It is the tropical forests that are most in decline, predominantly in south-east Asia, Africa and South America. Palm oil development causes less than 0.5% of global deforestation, but in parts of the tropics it can account for as much as half. It is suggested that more than 90% of global industrial-scale oil palm planting is in Malaysia and Indonesia. The increasing global demand for palm oil has led to rising production and rising deforestation rates. We recognise that that demand is unlikely to decrease.

I understand and share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Thornbury and Yate about the use of palm oil and the impact of its use on biodiversity—specifically the impacts he mentioned, such as the loss of forest habitat for orangutan populations. Such impacts are well known, but other impacts such as air pollution and greenhouse gas release caused by using fire to clear land, while discussed less regularly, are no less serious.

Despite those impacts, palm oil offers many benefits and is incredibly versatile. It is solid at room temperature so it can give products a longer shelf life; and it is odourless and colourless, which gives it a huge range of uses, as has already been said.

Palm oil also has an extremely high yield, which is six to 10 times higher than other vegetable crops. Although it uses just 10% of the area used globally to grow vegetable crops, it produces more than one third of the world’s vegetable oil. That high productivity means that if palm oil were replaced with alternative vegetable oils, it would result in a significant increase in the global area used to grow vegetable oils, with a correspondingly worse effect on biodiversity. For those reasons, I agree
with my hon. Friend that a ban is not the answer. Palm oil can be produced in a more sustainable way and the UK is helping to bring about that change.

What are we doing domestically? The UK has been one of the leading importer countries in terms of encouraging the move to the certified sustainable sourcing of palm oil. Since 2011, we have worked with trade associations, non-governmental organisations and others to encourage the switch to the sustainable sourcing of palm oil. During that time, significant improvements have been made.

Hon. Members will be aware of the UK statement on the sustainable production of palm oil, which was signed by trade associations, NGOs and the Government in 2012. It aimed to achieve the 100% sourcing of credibly certified sustainable palm oil. I have been trying to get an accurate figure about where we are on that from my officials. My understanding is that the latest report from the UK roundtable suggests that it has increased from 16% to 75% in 2017. We will continue to report annually on progress.

In response to the concerns of UK companies, the Government have widened our support of industry-led efforts to cover other commodities. Earlier this year, we launched a roundtable on sustainable soya, which reflects the UK’s imported land footprint from that globally traded commodity.

In reality, if we are going to sort the issue out, we will have to work internationally. The UK Government are actively engaging internationally to improve the sustainability of palm oil production. We are a member of the Amsterdam declarations partnership, which aims to eliminate deforestation from agricultural commodity chains with European countries. We support the ambition of a 100% sustainable palm oil supply chain in Europe.

We also support the Tropical Forest Alliance, which is a public-private initiative with more than 140 member organisations that is taking deforestation out of supply chains for palm oil, pulp and paper, beef and soya. It is having a significant impact on enabling the conditions for sustainable palm oil development and the realisation of zero deforestation sourcing and production commitments. In west Africa, the Tropical Forest Alliance’s support has resulted in the engagement of 10 countries in its Africa palm oil initiative, which sets out a framework for the sustainable development of the palm oil industry in the west and central Africa regions that addresses the environment, jobs, rights, gender equality and other core sustainability issues.

The Government’s 25-year environment plan sets out our ambition to support and protect the world’s forests by supporting sustainable agriculture and zero deforestation supply chains, including for palm oil. In line with the commitments set out in the plan, I launched the global resource initiative in October, which is a joint departmental project to tackle the UK’s impact on the global environment. We are working with stakeholders, including the private sector and key NGOs such as the WWF, to create demand-side incentives for sustainable international sourcing at home, while supporting supply-side improvements and better resource governance in trading partner countries.

Through the UK’s Partnerships for Forests programme, we are providing support for sustainable trade in palm oil. A lack of operational standards has been a significant barrier to realising corporate zero deforestation commitments. The support provided through the programme to the high carbon stock approach has helped to define a standard that is supported by industry and civil society. To date, the application of the high carbon stock approach by palm oil companies has resulted in the assessment of more than 2.4 million hectares of land in west Africa and south-east Asia. More than 0.5 million hectares of high carbon stock forest have been identified for conservation. This year, the high carbon stock approach was integrated into the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, which will further accelerate its uptake as an industry standard and ensure that the RSPO can certify palm oil to a deforestation-free standard.

The UK is doing more than ever to support the production of sustainable palm oil, but we can always do more and we seek to do more. I reiterate that we take individual action. This weekend, in Katowice, I met the Minister from Indonesia and we discussed this issue, among several others. I was reassured that they are trying their best to make sure that they can honour the commitments that they are signing up to, but none of us underestimates the challenge that they face.

On the other questions, I would be grateful if my hon. Friend and other hon. Members present recognised that we cannot do this singlehandedly. We are acting domestically, but we will continue to press for global and concerted action across all areas to ensure that we are successful. That is why we will continue to support business, other Governments and civil society to develop methods of production that are environmentally, socially and economically sustainable. We will continue to act on that, so we can genuinely do our best to leave the global environment in a better condition for the next generation.

5.6 pm

Luke Hall: I think there is genuinely a bigger passion for this subject than the turn-out for the debate suggests, but I am delighted to have the opportunity to wind up in front of all three Front-Bench speakers.

We recognise that the Government cannot tackle the issue singlehandedly. The work of the Government and the Minister to encourage those relationships around the world, and to encourage other Governments to take action on the issue, is widely appreciated. It is reassuring to hear that the Minister was speaking to Indonesian Ministers and counterparts as recently as this week. I look forward to working with her and supporting the Government on the issue in the months and years ahead. I thank her for her work and for her answers.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered e-petition 219758 relating to the sale of products containing palm oil.

5.7 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 December 2018

[MR GEORGE HOWARTH IN THE CHAIR]

House of Commons Financial Plan and Draft Estimates

9.30 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the House of Commons Financial Plan 2019-20 to 2022-23 and draft Estimates for 2019-20.

It is a delight to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. This is the first time we have had a debate such as this since 2014, and I think that all members of the Finance Committee feel that it is a shame and a mistake that we have not had one every year. I do not think we are the only people in Parliament who think that the management of the expenditure on the House and the way we do our business in Parliament has for years not been done as efficiently and effectively as it might be. In 2014, the Committee did have a debate of this kind. It took place on the Floor of the House and the expectation was that it would become an annual event. However, because we had general elections in 2015 and 2017, there was no Committee in place to ask for a debate, so we did not have one.

In the end, we are talking about taxpayers’ money here. Personally, I would be very critical of the whole way in which we spend taxpayers’ money in this country, in the sense that we theoretically have debates on estimates, but we never or very rarely have votes on them. We can only cut the amount of money being spent; we cannot reallocate from one estimate to another. To all intents and purposes, we do not really have a budget in this country, but a Budget statement. We do not have a budget in the sense that most other Parliaments in the world—or, for that matter, most local authorities—would understand the word. Therefore, the Finance Committee, which I chair, thinks it important that at least for this bit, which is the money spent on Parliament itself, we show a degree of discretion and try to get to the bottom of some of the key issues facing us.

We all also want to see far better responsibility and accountability for financial decisions made within the two parliamentary estimates that I will talk about. The two estimates, as I am sure you know, Mr Howarth, are the administration estimate and the Members estimate. The Members estimate is now much smaller than the admin estimate. I cannot for the life of me understand why we still have two estimates. I understand that the Finance Committee feel that it is a shame and a mistake that we have not had one every year. I do not think we are the only people in Parliament who think that the management of the expenditure on the House and the way we do our business in Parliament has for years not been done as efficiently and effectively as it might be. In 2014, the Committee did have a debate of this kind. It took place on the Floor of the House and the expectation was that it would become an annual event. However, because we had general elections in 2015 and 2017, there was no Committee in place to ask for a debate, so we did not have one.

In the end, we are talking about taxpayers’ money here. Personally, I would be very critical of the whole way in which we spend taxpayers’ money in this country, in the sense that we theoretically have debates on estimates, but we never or very rarely have votes on them. We can only cut the amount of money being spent; we cannot reallocate from one estimate to another. To all intents and purposes, we do not really have a budget in this country, but a Budget statement. We do not have a budget in the sense that most other Parliaments in the world—or, for that matter, most local authorities—would understand the word. Therefore, the Finance Committee, which I chair, thinks it important that at least for this bit, which is the money spent on Parliament itself, we show a degree of discretion and try to get to the bottom of some of the key issues facing us.

We all also want to see far better responsibility and accountability for financial decisions made within the two parliamentary estimates that I will talk about. The two estimates, as I am sure you know, Mr Howarth, are the administration estimate and the Members estimate. The Members estimate is now much smaller than the admin estimate. I cannot for the life of me understand why we still have two estimates. I understand that the Government object to binding these two estimates together, but I cannot understand why. The admin estimate is far bigger than the Members estimate, and having the two separate just seems an unnecessary additional administrative burden.

In relation to the admin estimate, which as I said is far larger, the process is iterative. That is to say that as we advance towards the final estimate being laid, we on the Finance Committee provide advice to the House of Commons Commission, and that informs the estimate that is eventually laid. Quite often in that process, we on the Finance Committee have tried to bring decisions earlier, so that the Commission can be better informed and we can have a more strategic look at the whole of our finances. Part of what governs that is that we set a remit for the resource element of the admin estimate. At the moment, that assumes zero real-terms growth. That is partly because we have been making some £15.5 million-worth of savings, which we can then reinvest. Those are not just cuts; they are genuine savings. We are doing more for less money and we can then put the money back into the resource element of the admin budget.

We do have some exceptions and I worry, as Chair of the Committee, that the number of exceptions always grows; it never seems to diminish. For instance, we allow ourselves, quite rightly, an exception from the remit for increased scrutiny of Government. Brexit has led to an extra Select Committee. That has a cost, because there have to be Clerks and there has to be Committee time and there are printing costs and all the rest of it. Indeed, in recent years, the Select Committee process has become one of the most important elements of the way we do our business in Parliament, and consequently there has been a dramatic increase in the amount of work that those Committees are doing. The Liaison Committee, which gathers together the Chairs of all the Select Committees, made a passionate plea for an additional £1.3 million this year, and we think that that is an important additional piece of expenditure.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Quite.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman is outlining his case very cogently. He has talked about the expansion of Select Committees. Does he agree that, hopefully in the very near future, the Exiting the European Union Committee will not have much more to do?

Chris Bryant: Yes, but for a completely different reason: I hope that we will be exiting Brexit rather than Brexiting, although I do not think that that is a matter for this debate, Mr Howarth.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Quite.

Chris Bryant: The second exception that we make—again, I think that it is difficult to disagree with—relates to security. The physical aspects of security in this building and of Members in their constituencies are obviously important, but as we have seen in the last two years, the cyber-security of the parliamentary estimate is also a vital element of enabling the democratic process to proceed. It is not just Russia but China and, potentially, a whole series of other countries that, as state actors, might be seeking to undermine the cyber-security of this place, and it would be all too easy for other people engaged in espionage to attack it. Of course, there have also been the very sad deaths of Jo Cox and PC Keith Palmer.

I am therefore fully aware that it is important to have an exception from the remit for security, but we need to be very clear that we are getting good value for money and that we are not wasting taxpayers’ money, even when we are dealing with security matters. I have some concerns about the contract with Chubb and the way it has been administered; I think that the Committee will want to look at that in the near future.

One of the largest areas of exception from the remit is, of course, the major strategic programmes that we have in the Palace of Westminster. There are three such programmes.
The first is restoration and renewal. Everyone is aware of that—we had a big debate on it. Unfortunately, the delays in delivering it have made it very difficult for us to be clear about exactly when we will be incurring the expenditure. Indeed, the delays in decision making in the House have made it more difficult for the Officers of the House to be able to deliver clear financial decision making.

The second programme is the northern estate programme. That is definitely progressing. We have been involved in looking at some of the suggestions of what there may be, including in relation to the alternative Chamber that will be built, largely on the same basis as the current Commons Chamber but with better disabled access; provision of offices for Members who are being decanted out of this building; and ensuring that the whole of the northern estate within the curtilage is efficiently and effectively used. I passionately support that programme, because I think that at the end of it we will have a legacy for future generations that will improve access for the public to the whole of the parliamentary estate and to the archives.

That is the third programme—the archives accommodation programme. I do not know whether any Members have been into the archives of late, but it is virtually impossible to get there; it is certainly very difficult for any members of the public to get there. The photograph room has never worked since it was first installed, and all the rolled Acts of Parliament, going back to the 14th century, could be far better stored than they are now. They are higgledy-piggledy; they are in time order, but should be far more carefully stored. However, that cannot really happen until such time as we have new provision.

We have also made an exemption—this is new for us—for any decisions made by the House in relation to reports that are being done. The most important example is the Dame Laura Cox report, which has already led to significant public interest, as people want to ensure that Parliament is a safe place for everybody to work and that there is no bullying or harassment. There are costs involved in delivering that review and we are keen to support that, and we will doubtless be keen to support whatever Gemma White QC comes up with, when her review is completed.

In addition, we have allocated £2.4 million for the Sponsor Board, which is up and running in shadow form. I see that one of its members—my right hon. Friend, who has been one of the key people seeking to drive this forward, in his role as a Whip and given his responsibility for Opposition accommodation. He is fully aware of the problems there have been throughout the Palace. The new fire doors are absolutely hideous, but they are essential. I am sure that when we get around to restoration and renewal we will have a version of them that performs the same function, but is more in keeping with the building. Finally, we have allocated £3.3 million of the administration budget to the restoration and renewal customer and client team, which builds the occupation for R and R when it comes online.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, which are important to many hon. Members, are funded out of the resource aspect of the administration estimate, as is the History of Parliament Trust. We have tried to be as tough with each of those bodies as possible, to ensure that we are getting good value for money. The only comment I would make about the IPU and the CPA is that in many other Parliaments there is a foreign affairs department with a room to welcome guests from other Parliaments. It keeps a record of who has visited and where MPs have gone on visits. That is available to their foreign office.

There is a kind of inventory of all the work that is being done on foreign affairs visits. That does not happen here.

We have a multiplicity of different Committees and all-party parliamentary groups, and all the rest of it. For example, I went to Colombia in September, courtesy of ABColumbia. It would have been interesting to have seen which other Members had visited there over the last five years and good to have exchanged information with them before going. Keeping such records is not something that we do, but it is one of the things that we should look at for the future.

Mr Clive Bets (Sheffield South East) (Lab): Other Parliaments often have friendship groups, as they call them, which are serviced by staff from their Parliament, so there is a continuity to the visits and a base in the Parliament where Members can be serviced, and information collected and retained. That simply does not happen in this country.

Chris Bryant: That is absolutely right. When—if—Brexit happens, it will be all the more important, in relation to other European countries, that Members of this House and the House of Lords will be seen as diplomats or ambassadors on behalf of Parliament. We need to garner the information, ideas and contacts that come through that in the national interest. I worry that we do not do that very well at the moment.

The capital elements of the administration estimate are quite significant. We are talking about £236.8 million. Some of the figures in the report that we have published are slightly different from the figures that we are talking about now, because this is an iterative process. In a sense, the reason for having this debate was to be able to inform those decisions as they go forward to the commission. The two largest elements of this relate to the major ongoing building projects. Of that, £117.4 million relates to the Strategic Estates projects. I think everybody on the Committee would say that we worry about the Strategic Estates. It is not just that the Elizabeth Tower...
started off at one price and ended up at a completely different price—incidentally, it ended up being a rather different project. With the stone courtyard project, the money we were allocating for all five courtyards has been taken up on one. I am sure that both the Labour party and Conservative party would have moaned about this, but we also decided to close the cloister—one of the most beautiful parts of the Palace—and move all the staff out more than 18 months ago, yet work has still not started on it, even though it desperately needs work.

**Mark Tami:** We were told at the time that those people had to leave because that work was essential and could not wait under any circumstances—it was quite an exercise to find somewhere else for those people—only to see it left empty, apart from some building materials that have been left there.

**Chris Bryant:** That is distressing and worrying. Apart from anything else, it is worrying because it is one of the most beautiful parts of the palace, which is hardly used or visited by the public. I hope that when restoration and renewal is complete we will not have destroyed the beautiful work that was done by Henry VII and Henry VIII. That would be a terrible sadness. The delay is down to capacity in the team and physical capacity on the site. It is not down to somebody being negligent in their job, or anything like that, but it is simply down to capacity. If we are unable to get that work done, there is a danger that we will lose one of the most important architectural aspects of the building.

It is not all bad. The cast-iron roofs project has been extraordinarily successful. It is on time and on budget. It is a massively impressive project. It has basically kept two companies in the north of England afloat over the last few years. The encaustic tiles project has been very successful as well. It is great to see the floors now being sorted out. It is also quite interesting to see people in the shop buying the old encaustic tiles that have been lifted up, thereby bringing a little bit of income back into the Palace as well. They are quite good Christmas presents, Mr Howarth. If you feel like buying one, you can buy me one.

**Mr George Howarth (in the Chair):** It is very kind of the hon. Gentleman to give me such advice.

**Chris Bryant:** All of us on the Committee have a fundamental worry that sometimes, because we have to meet Government pay scales and agreed limits, we end up paying for a lot of consultancy advice. That ends up creating more expense, but because it is sort of off the books, or is not accounted in the same way, somehow it meets some kind of Government requirement. I think this is a false economy. We are desperate to do whatever we can to ensure that we do not continue wasting taxpayers’ money in that way.

I should add that we are spending £88.8 million in the capital element of the administration estimate on the northern estate programme. It has been difficult to know when this money will be spent. That is one reason why it has been difficult to get the finances precisely right this year, because we did not know when we would be starting the work. If political decision-making causes delays, it adds to the cost. If the Minister has any role in making sure that key decisions come at the right time, and that we are not putting off votes, for instance—if she can chivvy the Leader of the House, or whoever makes such decisions—it would be enormously helpful to the finances of Parliament.

The Members estimate relates to Short money, which is available to make sure that Opposition parties can do their job properly. I am glad we won the battle a few years ago to make sure that is adequate. It also pays for the Deputy Speakers’ salaries and for the Exchequer elements of contributions to the pensions fund. It stands at £17.7 million, which is a little bit up from £17.1 million previously.

I will finish with a few general points. We on the Committee feel that we do not manage many of these processes well yet, so there is work to do. One issue about the Elizabeth tower, which I have already referred to, was that not enough investigative work was done before we started to let the contract. We then found out that the cables were not in the place that all the maps said they were, which incurred significant extra cost. We were also probably too optimistic about what it was going to cost. We now have a much better estimate of our optimism bias, although I have a slight worry that if we are too pessimistic, that will simply be an excuse for spending more money than we needed to in the first place. It is a difficult balancing act.

Another issue was that, in the end, the contract for the Elizabeth tower was let when there was no Parliament. Everybody ran around asking, “Who made the decision?”, but the truth is that it was taken somewhere between the Commission, which still existed because it is a statutory body, the Treasury, the Leader of the House and the accounting officer, who is the Clerk of the House. We need to have much greater continuity when we have general elections. To not have a Finance Committee for the best part of six months is a mistake. There is a strong argument for putting the Finance Committee on a statutory footing, as the Commission is, so it can still exist even when there is no Parliament, because financial decisions still have to be made.

**Mark Tami:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right; I have served on the Finance Committee and the Administration Committee. We sometimes concentrate on small items that cost very little, and scrutinise them to the nth degree, yet no one is quite sure who actually signed off a massive project.

**Chris Bryant:** Yes; I never want to have the debate on whether we should put 3p or 5p on the price of a cup of tea ever again.

**Mr Betts:** What is my hon. Friend’s view?

**Chris Bryant:** I am led by the Committee. It is a serious point that we sometimes obsess about small amounts of money, but, for example, it looks as if the fire safety budget will have gone from £90 million to £160 million, and it is perfectly legitimate to ask who made that decision and at what point a decision was made by a Committee of the House or by the accounting officer. If we cannot match responsibility and accountability, there is a real danger that financial mistakes will be made and significant amounts of money will go in the wrong direction.
I have already made the point, but I want to labour it, that we are too bound by Government pay scales. That has made it difficult to pay the right price to get the job done in one of the most complicated and difficult buildings and in the context of the most complicated and difficult political decision-making processes. Many staff who work here are admirable—they dedicate themselves to their task as much as any Member of Parliament and work many hours beyond what they are required to do—but, all too often, we end up bringing in experts on consultancy rates and paying more than we need to simply because we are trying to meet the Treasury’s rules. That is a mistake.

I worry that the building swamps the work financially. We are talking about spending dramatic amounts of money on the building, but what is really important here is the scrutiny work that we do, the public coming to understand how we do our democratic business and the engagement with the public. There are major projects that should be slanted much more towards the public.

A classic instance is that, of late, people have regularly queued for an hour or two hours—often standing in the pouring rain—to get into the building to watch democracy in action. We simply have to do better on such projects. I have heard lots of different explanations. Sometimes I am told that it is because one of the security arches is not working, or that people are working to rule because they are fed up with decisions that have been made elsewhere in the Palace—who knows? All I know is that the public feel they are getting a pretty rum deal. They are often late for meetings that they are coming to in Parliament. This should be an open place, not one that the engagement with the public. There are major projects that should be slanted much more towards the public.

I have already made the point, but I want to labour it, that we are too bound by Government pay scales. That has made it difficult to pay the right price to get the job done in one of the most complicated and difficult buildings and in the context of the most complicated and difficult political decision-making processes. Many staff who work here are admirable—they dedicate themselves to their task as much as any Member of Parliament and work many hours beyond what they are required to do—but, all too often, we end up bringing in experts on consultancy rates and paying more than we need to simply because we are trying to meet the Treasury’s rules. That is a mistake.

I worry that the building swamps the work financially. We are talking about spending dramatic amounts of money on the building, but what is really important here is the scrutiny work that we do, the public coming to understand how we do our democratic business and the engagement with the public. There are major projects that should be slanted much more towards the public.

A classic instance is that, of late, people have regularly queued for an hour or two hours—often standing in the pouring rain—to get into the building to watch democracy in action. We simply have to do better on such projects. I have heard lots of different explanations. Sometimes I am told that it is because one of the security arches is not working, or that people are working to rule because they are fed up with decisions that have been made elsewhere in the Palace—who knows? All I know is that the public feel they are getting a pretty rum deal. They are often late for meetings that they are coming to in Parliament. This should be an open place, not one that is almost impossible to get into.

Mark Tami: I certainly agree. After many years of using the Palace, some organisations are questioning whether they will carry on, because of the inability to get people in. After restoration and renewal, we are talking about doubling the number of people who come here, but there is no point having ambitious targets if we cannot get people in safely and more quickly.

Chris Bryant: As always, my right hon. Friend makes my point better than me, so I am grateful.

Finally, the structure is not quite right. It has been some time since the Commission was put on a statutory basis after the Straw review. The Leader of the House is keen to look at having the Commission elected, which I support; I would have the whole Commission fully elected to do a job. It would then function more like a traditional Select Committee and more like a team. That would be a good way to go forward, rather than the process we have now, in which all the members of the Commission are appointed by their respective party leaders, and then there are two external members, who are often the most informed and independently-minded on all the financial aspects but, bizarrely, are not allowed to vote. That system needs to change.

I have already said “finally”, but I will say it again: finally, if anything I have said has given the impression that I am not respectful of the Clerks or the people who work for the Committee, that would be a complete mistake. Myfanwy Barrett is a wonderful woman who has done a sterling job for many years. It is an enormous sadness to us that she is leaving—but who knows, maybe we will be buying in her consultancy advice later at a much greater price.

Mark Tami: Fiona Channon, who I have dealt with for many years about offices, is also leaving and going to the House of Lords, which will be a great loss to the Commons.

Chris Bryant: I do not want to turn the debate into the Oscars, but I also thank Philip Collins, who has done a magnificent job for us, and Rob Cope, who is our Committee Clerk.

We have done things differently in the last few months. We are keen to make sure that the Commission regularly hears our voice before it makes decisions about key financial matters. In the end, we are spending taxpayers’ money and we should do it better.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) on clearly putting forward the case and on bringing the report to the Chamber. We are deeply indebted to him for his knowledge and interest in the House, and for his delivery of speeches. The low number of hon. Members present does not reflect the importance of the debate or of the issue. This is not the most dynamic subject, but it keeps the wheels turning, so we need to at least record our support for what has been proposed. I also put on the record my thanks to every member of the Finance Committee for the tremendous work they have done to produce the report.

I will discuss a few issues that I feel are important, one of which is security. I want to reflect on my own offices and the budget for them, including for security. For a number of years—since 1985 and for two years after I became a Member of Parliament—I ran my own business, and somewhat successfully, in that I made my tax returns and paid my tax every year. It was therefore a successful business. It also paid for my holidays and my mortgage over the years. I fully understand the importance of balancing the books. I also understand that we cannot plan for everything, and the hon. Gentleman’s introductory comments about the report clearly illustrated that things crop up. The courtyard is one example that he referred to, whereby the costs for one thing took up the money that was supposed to look after five, so again we see the problems that occur.

I have been made aware by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority that my staff would benefit from greater security measures in my constituency office, and I was also informed that the costs for that would be met from an additional budget. How it was to be done was very clear. If every MP was faced with a scenario in which they had to implement new security measures, the cost would be great indeed.

I have discussed with my staff which measures we believe to be necessary, and which can be resolved by small changes that make a big difference in increasing safety levels in the office and in operating a clear zero-tolerance policy on verbal abuse of staff. However, most of my staff are ladies and are unafraid of anybody and stand up for themselves. I might be their boss, but I know my place in life and although I give them instructions
about what to do, they tell me what they think. There is nothing wrong with that; there is a good, fair and clear exchange on how things are. However, it is my responsibility to address any safety concerns and so I have tried to do that; indeed, I believe that I have done that to their satisfaction.

How much more was that the case for this place in dealing with the breach of Westminster Bridge, which was a direct attack on Parliament and which the hon. Member for Rhondda mentioned? We all know that; the attack is clear in the minds of those of us who sat imprisoned in the main Chamber during that time. I will advocate day and night for resources for security to ensure that this place is as safe as is possible, not simply for us as MPs but for every staff member in this House, who turn the wheels and ensure that this House operates at a very high level.

For that reason, I believe we must be fully accountable for, and transparent in, expenditure, and the general public must be made to understand that the money to run the parliamentary estate is not spent on giving us all our own butter. The report says:

“The Administration Estimate funds expenditure arising from the general administration of the House of Commons and activities undertaken to meet Parliament’s objectives and associated commercial activities. This includes, for example, the cost of House staff, office accommodation in Westminster, running and maintaining the Parliamentary estate, printing, security, broadcasting, IT and catering.”

All those activities turn the wheels and make this House successful. However, we must be able to address security issues as well.

The other issue I will raise is the House’s decision to support the comprehensive restoration and renewal of the Palace of Westminster, which has resulted in a significant ramping-up of activity over the course of the year. Along with the resource implications of other capital projects, such as the northern estate programme, it has resulted in a net increase of £85.5 million on the 2019-20 baseline that was agreed last year.

We understand the issues, but sometimes we are stuck betwixt two things: improving the House and making sure that it does not decay further, while at the same time making sure that we can still operate in it. That is the big question that the Members of this House have to answer.

The fire doors are an example. I met a lady this morning at nine o’clock for an interview that I was doing. We went through the fire doors and she said, “When did these come into place?” The hon. Member for Rhondda referred to them as well. They are not the most attractive, to be honest, but they are effective; they have a job to do and they clearly do it. The safety of those in this House is very important. The House of Commons is crumbling in parts, including its stonework, plumbing, electrics and much else, but at the same time we must ensure that we can continue to operate in this House.

If we are to save this wonderful piece of history, and my opinion is that we must secure this massive attraction and physical bastion of democracy—or at least that was my opinion until last night’s antics, which have thrown everything into question about whether we are truly democratic in this House. However, that is not the debate for today—although what happened last night does annoy every one of us, and if people are not annoyed, there is something wrong. That is all I can say. However, that is another debate for another time.

It is my belief that we should withhold the voluntary divorce payment to Europe and take care of our own pressing needs in this place. Again, that is just my suggestion for this debate and how I feel.

Many others in this House feel the same way. I did not sit on the Committee but, as Members will know, I take an interest in the things that happen in this House. I take an interest in the report that the hon. Member for Rhondda has put forward and I am also interested in all the thoughts and ideas put forward by all the members of the Committee.

To conclude, I support this report and its recommendations, as well as the thought and effort that went into bringing it forward. There is a need for enough funds for it to be implemented, but there must also be enough funds to ensure that all of us, at every level and in every Department in this House, economise in every way, when that is possible. I am an Ulster Scot. Some people say that every pound is a prisoner. Maybe it is; I do not know, but we are thrifty. We are careful about how we spend our money. When it comes to looking after the money for this place, we must economise where possible, and do what we expect everyone out there to do, who are doing it every day—stretch the pound until it squeals.

10.6 am

Mr Clive Bets (Sheffield South East) (Lab): As always, Mr Howarth, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I came to Westminster Hall today hoping to be presented with a long-service award. I think that I have been on the Finance Committee since the 2005 Parliament. The hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), who is not here today, has been an assiduous member of that Committee and I think that he has been on it, too, for most of that time. Collectively, we have quite a good memory as to how things used to happen, and I will come back to that in a minute.

It is absolutely right that we should have this debate. As said by the Chair of the Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), there has been a gap in having a debate to which all Members can contribute. Next year, we can hopefully go back to having the debate on the Floor of the House, with an amendable motion, hopefully to get more interest from colleagues. That is where we set off and it would be helpful again in the future. The problems around renovation and restoration, including the decision making on it and the complexity that programme has introduced to the budget process, have somewhat handicapped us this year, but I hope we can get back to that arrangement in the future.

I also echo what the Chair of the Committee said when he asked why we need two estimates. When Members estimates dealt with all Members’ expenditure—their expenses, as they are often referred to—one could perhaps understand why there was a need for two estimates. Now, however, that work is carried out by IPSA and the Members estimate is such a small amount that it needs to be absorbed, so that we can get away from the need for two separate sets of accounts.
The Chair has also gone through some of the issues that the Committee has been dealing with, but thinking back to when I joined the Committee in the 2005 to 2010 Parliament, what is remarkable now is that we actually have a budget. Believe it or not, we did not have one then. If I said that the finances of the House were run worse than those of the most inefficient district council, I would be exaggerating—I would say the most inefficient town council. It was that bad.

Money got spent, nobody properly accounted for it and there was no proper monitoring. What we have now is a budget agreed each year, which is clear. We monitor against the budget; we have a forward plan; we have a framework for the budget, including criteria in which we lay down what is acceptable in terms of increases for future years, based on inflation, plus any exemptions that are brought forward, such as the Brexit Committee, increased scrutiny or security; and we have an efficiency programme as well.

There have also been efforts to raise extra income, which have been successful in many respects, through catering. We have also tried to bear down on costs. I think that we will have the lowest ever subsidy for catering this year and that is entirely reasonable. We put some subsidy in, because the catering by and large is used by the staff who work in this place, and any reasonable and responsible employer would provide that degree of subsidy for people who do not have a choice about where they eat, particularly at lunchtime.

We should recognise that all those things are a great improvement. By and large, I am pretty comfortable that we are in a good place with the revenue budget. There will be arguments, challenges and disagreements about particular amounts of money, the exemptions to expenditure control and whether efficiencies are going quickly enough, and it is absolutely right that we bear down and put extra pressure on those issues. By and large, however, I think we are in a reasonable place, and can justifiably say, and be content with the fact, that the large, however, I think we are in a reasonable place, and

On the capital programme, the situation is not quite as rosy. We can go through a number of the examples that have been highlighted. All the time, we have the challenge of getting to grips with exactly what is going on with some major projects. Hopefully, we now have systems in place that are learning lessons from past mistakes, but we can go around and see the evidence, can’t we? At some stage, there is a story to be told about the Portcullis House roof. I have always said that if someone wanted a page in The Mail on Sunday on that roof, they would probably get at least two pages and a colour supplement to match. It is not right yet, is it? It will be even more interesting when we come to replace it. How will it be replaced? It needs replacing at some point. That fundamental issue was not thought of when the roof was designed and constructed. No one here now is to blame, but there are clearly lessons to be learned.

On the Elizabeth Tower, hopefully lessons are being learned. Ultimately, the work probably needed to be done. It is probably the right project, and what is being done now is value for money, but how we got here is not a good example. We have the fire safety work. Again, it needed to be done, but how we got to the sum is not a good example of financial control. There are the problems with the stonework, and the contracts that have now been suspended, following all the difficulties that have been experienced. Then there is the contract for the sprinkler systems that went with the fire safety. There, again, is a story about how a project was designed and controlled. It does not make happy reading. There are lessons to be learned.

On the other side, we simply must accept that there will always be difficulties and challenges when dealing with this type of building. The very fact that every time we set off on a project it is almost certainly a one-off—it will not have been done for many years, and hundreds in some cases—and we will find things we did not expect. The unexpected will always happen. We are in a listed historic building with lots of construction workers around, and Members of Parliament and the public want security. It will never be easy to do construction work in this place. That is a reality, so it will probably never be possible to absolutely nail down the cost of a project right at the beginning and to know where we will get to at the end. We will find new issues and challenges and it will be difficult, but there are lessons we must learn, and be shown to learn, if we are to retain the confidence that public money is being properly spent.

I echo the comments of the Chair of the Finance Committee about the issue of paying staff properly for this sort of work—I have gone on about it ad nauseam, I know. It is a problem. The reality is that in certain areas—construction and IT systems—we are competing with the private sector in London. There is great pressure for those services and we end up bringing in contractors and agency staff and paying more than we would if we appointed people to the House service. In the end, it is a matter of being more flexible about the rules within which we have to operate, regarding the comparison between our pay grades and those of the civil service. That is a challenge we must recognise, and the unions have brought it to our attention. That is not in any way to denigrate the other people who work in the House—exactly the opposite. The Chair of the Finance Committee is absolutely right that we should give them great credit for the service they give us, right across the field, and for their dedication to working for the House, for us and for democracy. That should be put on record.

There have been comments about R and R and the northern estate and I will not go into what has already been said, but I am concerned about the considerable complications of the shadow R and R arrangements. The little draft diagrams about decision making under the arrangements are very challenging indeed. I also sit on the Members Estimate Audit Committee, and the other day I asked the National Audit Office whether, if there were a problem with the shadow R and R arrangements, it could be certain, as our auditor, of identifying where responsibility and accountability lay. I think it would be hard pushed to do that. It has gone away to consider it, but it is a worry, and we are heading for problems if we set up a system in which we cannot point with absolute certainty to where decisions are made and accountability rests. Everyone always blames everyone else when things go wrong and then there is the challenge there that we ought to think about. I do not know how to get around it, because until we get to the final stage of the statutory arrangements it is very
difficult indeed, but the shorter the period of shadow arrangement the better, and the less chance of things going wrong.

I have two final points. I first thank the Chair of the Finance Committee for how he has chaired the Committee this year. We perhaps set off with a different idea of who the Chair should be, but I nevertheless thank him for the inclusive way in which he has run the Committee. We have worked together to address some of the issues and I put on record my thanks to him. Also, the Chair rightly mentioned Myfanwy Barrett, who is leaving us. I have worked with her with various hats on, on the Finance Committee, as a pension trustee on the House of Commons Members’ fund, and on the Audit Committee, and she appears at all these meetings to give us very appropriate and sound advice. I talked initially about how we used to do finance in this place and how we now have proper systems in place, and much of the credit for that goes to Myfanwy. She has changed the system and have proper systems in place, and much of the credit for that done for us. No doubt there will be opportunities to thank her again in Committee, but this is probably the only chance we will get in the wider forum of Parliament, so I would like to put that on record.

10.17 am

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth.

I suspect that members of the Finance Committee will be wondering, “Who on earth is this guy? He isn’t the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts”. I bring the apologies of my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), who had hoped to be here but has had to remain in Scotland due to family illness. I am sure that I speak on behalf of all of us here in Westminster when I wish him well.

When I spoke to my hon. Friend last night, he said he was grateful to me for taking on this speaking commitment about “one of the driest Committees in the House”, but I have to say that having sat through the debate, I have often found myself saying, “Be still my beating heart”. I sit on the Procedure Committee, so this is positively exciting—I might speak to my chief Whip to see whether I can catch a swap. In all honesty, I am grateful to the Finance Committee for its report, which was very illuminating at 1 o’clock this morning when I read it. I will touch on that in a moment.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is absolutely right about the need to be diligent about how we spend taxpayers’ money, and that the scrutiny of the process in the past has been less than satisfactory. Wearing my Procedure Committee hat, I know that there are issues with how Committees are set up—particularly after general elections, when the scrutiny is not there. The public look to us, as Members of Parliament, to lead that scrutiny. It takes several months at a time to get Committees up and running, and that is a very different context from that of the Finance Committee. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for putting that on the record.

The hon. Gentleman was also absolutely right to pay tribute to the Clerks and the House staff, who do a magnificent job—I know he intended to do that, although it came towards the end of his speech. I certainly felt that yesterday, when watching the chief Clerk chairing what was a very volatile day. We really do get our money’s worth out of those guys. The hon. Gentleman was right to place that on the record.

I shall sum up the contributions. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about security and the importance of looking after our staff, not just in our constituency offices but here in the Palace—the staff here are the real heroes of the House. He went on to speak about restoration and renewal, which I will touch on, and he said that perhaps some of the issues could be solved if we withheld our payment from Europe. I am not necessarily sure he will find agreement from me on that.

I was not aware that the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) had been on the Committee since 2005. If my heart is beating very fast from just one debate, goodness knows what that amount of time serving on the Committee does for the soul. The hon. Gentleman spoke about the importance of learning from past mistakes, and had some fairly sage advice in regard to Portcullis House.

That brings me nicely to my own contributions to the debate. I have looked at the front page of the report and seen the draft estimates, or the financial plan to 2022-23. As a Scottish National party Member of Parliament, I make no apology for not intending to be here in 2023. That is not because I plan to lose my seat; it is because the hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and I will be surplus to requirements, because Scotland will be an independent country and we will not need Members of Parliament down here. Perhaps that would be a good way of saving money.

The Minister is in her place; I have a standing engagement with her on Wednesday mornings, as the hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton (Afzal Khan) is trying valiantly to bring through a Bill that would stop the Government from reducing the number of Members from 650 to 600. It is interesting that the report talks about increased scrutiny throughout, whereas the Government are trying to reduce that scrutiny. Page 10 talks about what is probably the biggest elephant in the room: the decision to leave the European Union—well, it is not an elephant in the room, because we are all talking about it. We can clearly see that the implementation of that decision has an impact on the budgets in the report.

There are certain things for which the Scottish National party would clearly support increased budgets, some of which I have touched on, including security and perhaps the independent grievance process. However, I am accountable to my constituents back home, and I find myself talking to them about this place and the eye-watering sums being committed to restoration and renewal. The hon. Member for Rhondda spoke about building a replica Chamber; the fact that we are building a Chamber that looks exactly the same as the current one when that Chamber is so unfit for purpose sends a clear signal to ordinary members of the public.

We are recreating Division Lobbies that we can troop through. People regularly come to this place on tours, and I explain to them how we conduct our votes, walking through corridors—I mean, what an absolute waste of time! It is great that we have invested in the education centre, but the ironic thing is that when the children there cast their votes, they do so using an
David Linden: I am very happy to stick to your guidance, Mr Howarth, and will not take any gratification from having managed to provoke a PPS into speaking from the Back Benches. The reality is that I would be happy for us to meet in Glasgow, Edinburgh or Liverpool. The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire is fond of saying that this is the United Kingdom Parliament, but it seems to me that we are very London-centric, and some of these cost issues arise because we are so determined to be in the absolute centre of London.

I have already mentioned security issues; the hon. Member for Rhondda touched on some concerns, and I would echo some of them. There is clearly a focus on making sure that our security is very strong. I probably feel most secure when I am here in the Palace of Westminster; I feel a lot less secure when I am sitting in Baillieston library—that is not necessarily concern for my security, but for that of the staff who are with me. I am very happy to endorse the security budget.

I did not intend to speak for nine or 10 minutes, but it is possible to go down a rabbit warren on this subject, and it does get quite interesting. I will close by saying that at a time when austerity is not over, and our constituents are struggling with austerity, we need to be mindful about the decisions we make. As a fairly new Member of this House, I am not always convinced that we get value for money. Nevertheless, in all sincerity, I pay tribute to the Finance Committee for carrying out a job that I am sure can be very dry, but is none the less very important.

10.27 am

Karlin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. Much like the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), I came rather late to the honour of responding to this debate, and found myself at a late hour on Monday evening doing something completely different than I had planned. However, like him, I have found the debate fascinating, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) for leading it.

At the outset, I will highlight some areas of success. We often talk about areas of failure when we talk about such topics, but there have been areas of success over the last few years. However, I will first pick up on an area of great concern: the absence of a Finance Committee over a six-month period during an election period. I think that is something that we would like to hear about from the Minister.

As a lifelong NHS bureaucrat, I have had to come to some documents quite late in time. Yesterday evening, when I was given the report, I first turned to the appendix to see whether anything was hidden in there. True to form, in the planning for 2019-20 on page 11, in the high-level planning assumptions, the first thing I read was this:

“The political temperature is high and this may spill over into other areas”.

I trust that the Minister will be able to outline to us how she sees that working over the next couple of years.

I welcome the opportunity to debate these estimates, because as I said, I spent my previous life as an NHS manager, and I am also a former member of the Public Accounts Committee. In our public services and on the Public Accounts Committee, we expect public bodies to
behave to the highest standards. We expect them to demonstrate good financial planning, monitoring and accountability, and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda said, also to demonstrate value for money. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) is a local government expert. Across the land, we expect our councils to demonstrate value for money, so it is imperative that we do so in this place.

We know that over the next few years Parliament faces a number of significant policy matters and events that will have a bearing on the budget. They include Brexit, restoration and renewal, the refurbishment of the northern estate, the review of the parliamentary archives accommodation, the implementation of the digital strategy, the significant increase in the employers’ pension contribution, pay and reward strategy beyond the current pay deal, enhancing security around the parliamentary estate, and developing cyber-security and technology infrastructure. It is quite a list.

The House debated and voted on restoration and renewal in January, and we would all agree that the Palace of Westminster is in need of restoration and renewal and that a number of issues need to be resolved. We have agreed the decant ahead of the refurbishment work and the work going on with the sponsor body, as we heard earlier. Anyone who has visited the basements and the full extent of this place will know how urgent that work is. A couple of years ago, I had the great pleasure of visiting to look at those places. The conditions in which we are expecting people to operate to service this place and make it work are unacceptable. It is vital that that work continues.

Anyone who knows the history of when Mr Barry and Mr Pugin were doing the original work on this place will know that restoration and renewal is a huge project for the country that will elicit great interest, and it needs to be done properly. We have a massive opportunity for skills development, for apprenticeships, for good employment practices and for reviving great skills that have been lost in this country. We need to be an exemplar not only for the country, but for the world in how the work can be done to make this Parliament fit for the 21st and 22nd century, although we may lose the hon. Member for Sheffield South East programme will require additional resources and security measures. We all have strong memories of the March 2017 attack. A number of security projects have arisen from the Murphy review following that attack. We note that that work is due to be completed by summer 2021, but cyber-security remains a high risk. We know that from last week. The House will continue to face cost pressures from that, but security is critical to the work we do here.

The medium-term financial plan should enable the House service to support Parliament, deliver our specific objectives and demonstrate how the service will become increasingly effective and efficient over time. The strategy is currently being refreshed and the three existing strategic objectives are expected to be expanded to four: facilitating effective scrutiny and debate, involving and inspiring the public, securing Parliament’s future, and valuing every person. Those are important objectives.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Lady is talking about an important subject, and it is important that it is recorded in the debate. The traditions, history and procedures we have in the House are perhaps unique to this place, but they have been the inspiration for many other democracies across the world. I think the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) referred to that. It is so important that we retain those things in the House. We are a modern society, but we should also keep our traditions for democracies across the whole world.

**Karin Smyth:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I enjoyed the traditions, and I agree in large part that they are important, but the evolution of new traditions is also important. I have visited the Scottish Parliament building and the Welsh Assembly this year. I have also been to Stormont twice. It was fairly quiet, but the building is magnificent, as are the others. I take on board the issue about cost, but we should be evolving by learning from all parts of the United Kingdom about how they are operating in a more modern setting. I have heard my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda talk about the learning from Parliaments across the world. There has to be a way of preserving some of those traditions while making them work for the later part of the 21st century and into the 22nd century, which none of us will be here for. I hope we can bequeath something good to those who follow.

The investment plan sets out the bicameral plans for investment in strategic programmes, estates and digital. As we have heard, the bulk of that work is split into three areas: work on the Elizabeth Tower and fire safety, which is something we all would welcome; work on the northern estate; and the restoration and renewal programme, which we have talked about. I echo the comments made previously. It is important that that work is transparent and that we understand how it is happening. I am
slightly alarmed to hear some of the comments about how projects are managed and the difficulty the Committee has had in following some of the decision making and the finances. These are substantial projects and we need to be assured that they are being well planned and monitored and are value for money. I agree that discussion at least annually is valuable. I would be interested to hear from the Minister why that could not happen.

On the Public Accounts Committee, we visited the Major Projects Authority, which is part of the Cabinet Office, as the Minister will be well aware. The learning and understanding of how to manage major projects is great within parts of government. There needs to be a way of taking the learning from places such as the Major Projects Authority and the work going on in the Cabinet Office and making it applicable to the work of this place. It is not acceptable that we ask other people, other public bodies and spenders of taxpayers’ money to operate in one way and then we operate in another. Although I am late to it, I am slightly alarmed that that does not seem to be happening. I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East said about looking at the role of the National Audit Office. Its reports on decision making and accountability are very clear and easy to follow. If the NAO cannot find its way through it, something is clearly wrong.

In concluding, I thank all the staff who are involved in all aspects of the work to make this place operate. I thank members of the Finance Committee for publishing this report, for the important work they do behind the scenes, which most of us perhaps do not see, and for their diligence in bringing that work before us this morning. The Opposition support the recommendations of the Finance Committee and welcome the chance to debate and scrutinise this report.

10.38 am

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): I am sure that this cannot make up the full set of all those who were reading this report late last night in preparation for this morning’s debate. I thank hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions today, and I am pleased to be here to participate in this important debate on the House of Commons financial plan and draft estimates.

I apologise straight away that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is not here. By rights, she should be responding to this debate. I am happy to be here in her place, and I know she spoke last week to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), the Chair of the Finance Committee, to explain that she would not be able to be here today. She would like me to convey her apologies again this morning. She will be following the debate very closely through Hansard, and I will ensure that key points are brought to her attention.

I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this Westminster Hall debate. I pay tribute to his hard work in chairing the Finance Committee and his dedication to the work on the finances for this place. I also thank him for his work with the Government in the cross-cutting parts of the draft estimates where work needs to be done in conjunction with my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. As a member of the House of Commons Commission, she has asked me to thank the Finance Committee for its report, which represents the Committee’s provisional advice to the Commission, and the Members Estimate Committee for the 2019-20 to 2022-23 medium-term financial plan and the 2019-20 Administration and Members estimates. I am absolutely sure that she and all other members of the Commission and of the Estimate Committee will want carefully to consider the points made by Members today. I am also sure that they will want to carefully consider the thanks that have been expressed to the staff of the Committee and connected teams.

The Government continue to support a well-run House of Commons and share its drive to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the service. A high-quality service in support of Members’ duties is integral to the success and strength of our democracy and supporting processes. It is vital that all of us—Members and their staff, staff of the House, and the public—see that this House is committed to the delivery of a service that is both first class and excellent value for money. Today’s debate invites the House to consider those issues.

The purpose of the debate is to give Members the opportunity to comment on the advice before it is finalised, as the hon. Member for Rhondda set out in his opening statement. This annual debate on the draft estimates began in the previous Parliament and took place in 2012, 2013 and 2014 in the main Chamber: a point made by the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts). It subsequently fell into abeyance and so this is the first debate of its type in this Parliament. I know that the Chair of the Finance Committee submitted this as a Backbench Business debate, so we are here in Westminster Hall, but I hear the point about how it ought to be held in the Chamber. Perhaps that can be considered for the future. The fact that we are having this debate is to be welcomed because it allows the issues to be properly looked at in addition to the work of the Committees involved.

I want to thank the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), who spoke on behalf of the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Sheffield South East for their contributions, in addition to the Chair of the Committee for setting out the issues.

A question was asked about why the two estimates are separate. It derives from legislation, so it could be regarded as a shared responsibility between the House and the Executive. It was argued that the two estimates could be combined, and there might be value in doing so. I understand that trying to merge them was the subject of a private Member’s Bill in 2016, when points were made on both sides of the argument. However, there was a desire from the Treasury to be able to continue to offer the right level of scrutiny and support to the House of Commons to be able to manage the expenditure, which would not be possible if the two estimates were merged. I am happy to ask colleagues to look further at those issues, which are not in my current brief.

Mr Betts: How and to where will the Minister report back? It seems nonsensical. I cannot see why scrutiny should be any weaker if there is one estimate rather than two.
Chloe Smith: Indeed. I shall ask my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House to come back to the Chair of the Committee on that point so that it can be made clear.

On the question about the statutory footing of the Finance Committee compared with that which the House of Commons Commission enjoys, the Commission’s statutory footing gives it the authority that it needs to make the decisions that we ask of it, whereas the Finance and Administration Committees are advisory bodies. Clearly, there would need to be some consultation across the House to be able properly to scope such a decision to put those two advisory bodies on to a statutory footing. I know that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is keen to see a more democratic governance structure, which goes back to a point that was also made during the debate. I think she will listen carefully to the points made today and will wish to come back to the Chair of the Committee on that point about the statutory footing.

Chris Bryant: I kind of get that the Finance Committee is advisory, as is the Administration Committee, but the only gritty examination of the finances is done by my Committee. I previously sat on the Commission and it simply does not have the time to devote to finances because it deals with hundreds of other issues, so it would be in our long-term interests to change that pattern. Also indicative is the fact that not a single member of the Commission is here today. I have no beef with either the shadow Leader of the House or the Leader of the House. I know they are busy in shadow Cabinet and Government Cabinet. I fully understand that, but it is not great when not a single member of the Commission is here.

Chloe Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting those points on the record today. It is helpful that this debate has taken place so that that can be done. I will absolutely make sure that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House responds and discusses the issues with him so that they get proper scrutiny.

On the question of how frequently the Committee has been able to meet and how frequently the debate has been able to take place, there is a general point about how quickly Select Committees can be set up in any new Parliament, and of course the Government wish to see that done as quickly as possible and would support promptness in that setting up. Again, I shall ask my right hon. Friend to look at that point.

There are two remaining points to deal with. One is that of Government pay scales being too restrictive to allow work to be done properly. I suspect that that sits in the discussions that need to take place on restoration and renewal rather than in this debate. Once again I will ensure that my right hon. Friend hears what has been said today. As a general point on the pay scales, they exist to try to get consistency across the public sector and value for money for the taxpayer, which are well understood and respected points. However, I hear what has been said today about the specialisms sometimes required in the work that needs to be done within restoration and renewal.

The hon. Member for Bristol South was very kind to acknowledge the good work done by the Major Projects Authority. I thank her for that and will pass it on to colleagues in my Department. She suggested that expertise could be shared and I will be happy to see what can be done on that.

On some other areas more generally that I know the Leader of the House would want me to touch on, the first is restoration and renewal. The Finance Committee’s report explains that the primary reason for the difference between this year’s and last year’s MTFP is because of the House’s decision earlier this year to support comprehensive restoration and renewal of the Palace. I know that the Leader of the House has been determined to get on with that job, and the Government published the draft Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Bill in October, to give effect to the resolutions passed earlier this year.

The Bill will facilitate Parliament’s decision to set up a sponsor board and delivery authority to progress the comprehensive programme of works. It has been developed in close consultation with the House authorities and will, I hope, put in place the rigorous and transparent governance structure that we need to drive that work forward, while ensuring that we focus on value for money for the taxpayer. There cannot be a blank cheque for the work; the Government and Parliament agree that it must represent good value for money. We look forward to the report from the Joint Committee that is currently considering the draft Bill.

Following the work taken forward on a cross-party basis and led by the Leader of the House on bullying and harassment, the Government strongly welcome the provisions made, which are represented in the report, to support the introduction of the new independent complaints and grievance scheme. That is important to ensure better training, new human resources support and, crucially, the two new independent helplines and investigative services that underpin the new behaviour code. That is essential to ensure that we are supporting those who experience bullying or harassment, and to change the culture here in Westminster for the good, and for good.

I thank colleagues who have contributed to the debate, and emphasise just how useful it is for members of the commission and the Members Estimate Committee. Present or otherwise, I am sure that they will look at the debate carefully in Hansard. We can all agree that ensuring responsible and sustainable delivery of services for the House, while allowing for efficiency and value for money, is essential. I again thank the hon. Member for Rhondda, and I will ensure, as I have already undertaken, that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is made aware of today’s contributions.

10.51 am

Chris Bryant: I am grateful to all hon. Members who have contributed. I will respond to a few points, but first I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts); since my back was patted, I want to put his too. The Finance Committee is not necessarily the Committee that one expects to join when one arrives in Parliament, but ensuring that we properly scrutinise our finances is one of the most important things that we do as MPs. It is not something that the House of Lords can do; we are there to do it, and we are therefore an important Committee. I am grateful for the longevity of my hon. Friend’s service. That always makes him grimace, because he thinks that I am paying tribute to him beyond the grave.
Mr Betts: Not quite.

Chris Bryant: No, not quite. Anyway, I am grateful. I will respond to some of the earlier comments about R&R, or whether we should value this building or go off to a park in Milton Keynes—people always choose Milton Keynes. The problem with the argument for moving out of here and going somewhere else entirely is that because our system has the Executive within the Parliament we would effectively have to take the whole of Government with us as well.

I know that people argue, as I have myself sometimes, that Britain is far too London-centric, and that too much of the economy is focused on London and the south-east. However, the truth is that moving the whole of Government out of London to some other place, building some massive building, buying an enormous site and then providing accommodation for all those people would be more expensive than staying here, not least because this is a world heritage site. It is one of the most recognisable buildings in the world. We would still have to maintain it, even if we were going to hand it over to someone else anyway.

There would therefore be no cost saving. There may be political arguments, which I do not share, about the Union from the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden), and about other elements. However, in the end I do not think that there is any real alternative that is financially advantageous to the taxpayer that involves moving us out of the Palace in the long run. The hon. Gentleman also said that we will build a Chamber exactly like the one we have at present. There may be many good reasons for changing the way in which we do our business, but restoration and renewal is not one of them.

If we want to make changes, that is perfectly within the will of the House, but it is up to the House to make those decisions, rather than having them foisted upon us because of some kind of building project. As I understand it, the Clerks are already working on IT so that we will be able to vote in the Division Lobbies with our thumbprints or fingerprints, instead of having to walk through and tell them our names and all the rest of it.

As for the main substance of today’s debate, it is important that we scrutinise the finances of the House. They are not the biggest numbers in all Government expenditure, but they are very significant numbers, and over the next few years they will grow rapidly. One of the concerns of our Committee is that there is not much transparency about where decisions are made and whether they have been good decisions. As we move into the process of restoration and renewal, there is a danger that, if there is an extended period with a shadow Sponsor Board and a shadow delivery authority, where decisions are actually being made on very dramatic amounts of money will be even more opaque.

For instance, major decisions are being made on the northern estate project, which at the moment is not part of the restoration and renewal project, regarding the design, how many floors there should be, and what planning applications we should be submitting. Those decisions are currently being made somewhere between the Finance Committee, the accounting officer, and the commission. The shadow sponsor body will start to make key decisions, but, because it will not have statutory effect until the law is brought in, those decisions will have to be ratified by the Finance Committee advising the commission.

If that period goes on for too long, there is a danger that we will end up with bad decisions, uncertain outcomes and uncertain delivery of the project and the finances. The Government can make a material difference to that by introducing the legislation. We have it in draft form at the moment, and we are delighted that that has sped up a bit, thanks to the Leader of the House. However, we need to ensure that in the next Session we get on with passing that legislation as fast as possible.

The one caveat I add is that we should consider very carefully the fact that until 2004 the Palace, like all other royal palaces, was its own planning authority. Since 2004, we have not been our own planning authority, and we are subject to the planning decisions of Westminster City Council. We have a very good working relationship with the council at the moment, but in essence the project will completely dwarf its whole planning department. To all intents and purposes, we will be paying for a new planning department foisted on Westminster City Council. There is an argument for us saying, “Frankly, we should just have it in house, rather than being subject to Westminster City Council.”

I say that because one of the key decisions that is yet to be made concerns the lighting in Westminster Hall; I think that battle has been going on with the planning authorities for the best part of 12 years. That is why we still have hideous arc lamps on the side, on chunks of scaffolding poles, in one of the most beautiful buildings in Europe. If we are unable to make timely decisions, we will end up making more expensive decisions. We need at least to examine whether we should make ourselves our own planning authority.

I am enormously grateful to all those who have taken part in the debate and, in particular, to Myfanwy and her team, who are admirable.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the House of Commons Financial Plan 2019-20 to 2022-23 and draft Estimates for 2019-20.
NHS: Hysteroscopies

10.59 am

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered NHS treatment of patients requiring hysteroscopies.

It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. We know that hysteroscopies save lives, but all too often they cause excruciating pain and humiliation because some of the women who need them are not treated with the dignity, respect or even humanity that they deserve.

As hon. Members will know, a hysteroscopy involves the insertion of a camera into the womb, past the cervix, to look for abnormalities and potentially enable a surgeon to remove them. It can be used to rule out a diagnosis of cancer when women are experiencing heavy periods, unexplained bleeding, repeated miscarriages or difficulties in becoming pregnant and it is a core part of the treatment for debilitating conditions such as fibroids and health risks such as polyps in the womb. However, for some women patients it causes severe pain, a sense of violation and lasting trauma.

The NHS website states: “A hysteroscopy is not usually carried out under anaesthetic... Taking painkillers such as ibuprofen or paracetamol...can help reduce discomfort after the procedure.”

Unfortunately, many women experience severe pain during hysteroscopy. It is usually done with little or no anaesthetic, and many women are told nothing to prepare them for the agony that awaits. I have passed the Minister many dozens of anonymous cases from women who have experienced terrible pain at the hands of NHS surgeons and were ill-informed or misinformed about the pain risks and offered little or no pain relief. I am glad to say that she has always received those stories with sympathy, respect and human dignity that they deserve.

As hon. Members will know, a hysteroscopy involves the insertion of a camera into the womb, past the cervix, to look for abnormalities and potentially enable a surgeon to remove them. It can be used to rule out a diagnosis of cancer when women are experiencing heavy periods, unexplained bleeding, repeated miscarriages or difficulties in becoming pregnant, and it is a core part of the treatment for debilitating conditions such as fibroids and health risks such as polyps in the womb. However, for some women patients it causes severe pain, a sense of violation and lasting trauma.

Lady for securing the debate. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines published in March recommend that women should be offered an outpatient hysteroscopy if they have symptoms or risk factors associated with gynaecological conditions. Does she agree that that recommendation has not been translated into GP referrals? More must be done to ensure that those in need of the procedure, for the purpose of early diagnosis or the removal of issues, are referred and treated in an effective manner. It has to be done early, and that is where we fall down.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As my party’s health spokesperson, I am interested in all health issues, but particularly in this one, so I commend the hon. Lady for securing the debate. The National Institute for Health Care Excellence guidelines published in March recommend that women should be offered an outpatient hysteroscopy if they have symptoms or risk factors associated with gynaecological conditions. Does she agree that that recommendation has not been translated into GP referrals? More must be done to ensure that those in need of the procedure, for the purpose of early diagnosis or the removal of issues, are referred and treated in an effective manner. It has to be done early, and that is where we fall down.

Lyn Brown: I entirely agree, but the importance of early action is sometimes used to discourage or even force women to stay with a procedure that is causing them great pain because of the fear of what might happen afterwards. If the hon. Gentleman gives me a moment, I will illustrate that point.

In October, I heard from Jenny, who has undergone two hysteroscopies, both of which were traumatic. She told me:

My first experience was shocking. I wasn’t prepared for it. The doctor didn’t warn me at all, and during the procedure I experienced the most unbearable pain ever and I almost fainted. I rose up from the bed that I was on and I shouted out. It felt like my insides were being ripped out. I wasn’t given the option to stop nor was I given any support.

The nurse was behind the doctor throughout the procedure and just watched as I suffered. After the procedure my legs were like jelly. I felt faint and in pain but I wasn’t even helped off the bed. I wasn’t even given a sanitary towel to help with the bleeding. I left the room and drove myself home in that state. I’m lucky I didn’t have an accident. I felt traumatised, in a state of disbelief and shock.”

What is even more shocking is that Jenny’s second hysteroscopy was also traumatising, even though she now knew the risks and had taken steps to ensure that the same thing would not happen again. She explained to her doctor what had happened and requested a female doctor the next time. Her doctor said that she would write that on the referral, and at her pre-hysteroscopy appointment Jenny was told that she could have an injection to numb the area. She was reassured and trusted the female doctor to be more careful, but the procedure was—again—horribly traumatising. Jenny said:

“My god it was shocking, I once again shouted out and raised from the chair this time. The nurse was trying to calm me down...while the doctor said she would stop at any time but she needed to go in again and take a biopsy. I was told that if she didn’t...the procedure would be incomplete and I would be left worrying that it could be cancerous. So I endured more excruciating pain.

I wasn’t given the option to come back and have the procedure done under general anaesthetic, which I have now found out could have been an option. I felt tricked into having the procedure.

I suffered with terrible pain for a week after. Mentally I was left traumatised and still am to this day.

Understandably, Jenny is now scared about any gynaecological procedure—including smear tests, which she knows are essential for her health.

This autumn, Annie got in touch. Annie had had ultrasounds and smear tests before; like many others, she was given literature about her hysteroscopy that made her think that it would be no different. She was advised just to take paracetamol and ibuprofen before the appointment, and she felt confident. She told me:

“As the procedure began, I felt instant pain, so unexpected and intense that I began to cry and panic within seconds. I was asking the nurse if this was normal as I was so scared there was something wrong, and she nodded to reassure me. I could’t get my words out, I was panicking, going into shock. She offered me a towel and get dressed. It was hard—I was disoriented and shaking. I was asked to wait before I stood up, and I was so traumatised while the doctor said she would stop at any time but she needed to go in again and take a biopsy. I was told that if she didn’t...the procedure would be incomplete and I would be left worrying that it could be cancerous. So I endured more excruciating pain.

I wasn’t given the option to come back and have the procedure done under general anaesthetic, which I have now found out could have been an option. I felt tricked into having the procedure.

I suffered with terrible pain for a week after. Mentally I was left traumatised and still am to this day.

The nurses were telling me to relax my legs but it was impossible. When the Dr began the biopsy it was by far the worst pain I have ever suffered. I was hyperventilating and the nurse was telling me to breathe, but I couldn’t. I endured pain for 15-20 minutes.

I was asked to wait before I stood up, and I was so traumatised and sobbing, I just couldn’t move.

After a couple of minutes I got up and had to put on a sanitary towel and get dressed. It was hard—I was disoriented and shaking.

I sat with the Doctor who told me that due to it being too painful I have to have polyps removed under general anaesthetic. I could barely talk to him due to shock and tears. I wasn’t even offered water, and nobody asked me how I was getting home.
I cried from leaving the hospital at 2 until my wife arrived home at 6, at which point I broke down uncontrollably in her arms. I felt violated and abused, and the procedure felt very very wrong.”

As we know, women are still having these terrible experiences. I received another story in the past two weeks, but I do not have time to share them all. Women are still leaving NHS care feeling violated, and it ain’t going to stop unless we choose to stop it. I am very grateful to the Campaign Against Painful Hysteroscopy for providing support to those women and making sure that they are heard. The campaign group’s petition has received more than 47,000 signatures, which demonstrates that this is not an unusual, occasional thing.

We have four asks. First, if we are to stop patients from being violated or misled, all NHS trusts need to provide accurate information that enables women to give genuinely informed consent. I was pleased to hear from the Minister that her Department is developing tools to improve hysteroscopy care; I look forward to hearing her elaborate on those tools, but involving patients will be essential to making them work. The campaign wants to see a new patient information leaflet made available across the NHS. Campaigners have been working with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and with specialists to create an appropriate leaflet that patients who have had negative experiences of hysteroscopy have helped to write, but it still needs to be rolled out.

The leaflet needs to be honest with patients. It needs to warn that there is a real risk of severe pain during out-patient hysteroscopy, and explain the risk factors that make pain more likely. They should tell patients that they have the right to ask for the procedure to be stopped at any time and for it to be rescheduled with a full anaesthetic. Hospitals should no longer have any excuse to hand out literature stating there will only be “mild discomfort, just like a smear”.

After they have read through the leaflet, patients should be given an opportunity to discuss with a trained doctor what is going to happen during the procedure—whether a sample is going to be cut out for a biopsy, the risks involved, and the anaesthetic choices available. The campaign suggests that both patient and doctor should then sign a consent form to confirm the discussion has taken place and the choices the patient has made.

Our second ask is for improved training to enable better and more consistent care. We know that hysteroscopy can be a painless experience for women—some women will experience little pain from hysteroscopy even with minimal anaesthetic—but as we have heard, for others it will be like torture. There are some risk factors—older women and women who have never had children are far more likely to experience severe pain during hysteroscopy—but we cannot tell in advance what someone will experience, and that means we have to improve the guidelines and raise standards through training. The current national guidelines, produced by RCOG and the British Society for Gynaecological Endoscopy, do not recommend several forms of anaesthetic that I am told could be helpful. That has to be looked at, because for some patients, stronger forms of anaesthetic might be the only way to have a hysteroscopy without experiencing severe pain.

Once we have changed the guidelines, investment in training will be needed to embed new best practice across the NHS. Hysteroscopy nurses should be routinely asking for patients’ pain scores during the procedure, so that informed decisions can be made about whether to continue or to stop. We need to audit pain scores and keep records of how comfortable the surgeon was with continuing, so that we can monitor whether more training is necessary. It should be a basic element of training that hysteroscopy teams should simply stop the procedure if a patient is suffering severe pain—not just hold them down—and reassure the patient that the procedure will be promptly rescheduled with more effective anaesthesia, rather than using the threat of possible undetected cancer to encourage her to continue.

Our third ask is for enough resources to enable all NHS bodies, everywhere in the country, to give women the choice between different anaesthetics when they need a hysteroscopy. The problem is not just flawed guidelines and inadequate training. Trusts may be loth to enable anaesthesia beyond over-the-counter painkillers or local anaesthetic simply because other methods are more expensive. Some are in-patient procedures, and some require clinicians to have specific training, and we all know that that comes with extra costs.

Our fourth, and possibly most important, ask is for a change to NHS incentives for hospitals. According to the information we have, the Department of Health’s quality, innovation, productivity and prevention tariff encourages trusts to promote hysteroscopy without anaesthetic, rather than offering an open choice to women. Annex F to the 2017 to 2019 national tariff payment system is explicit:

“For...diagnostic hysteroscopy...the aim is to shift activity into the outpatient setting.”

The best practice tariff “is made up of a pair of prices...one applied to outpatient settings, the other...to elective admissions. By paying a higher price for procedures in the outpatient setting, the BPT creates a financial incentive for providers to treat patients there.”

The national target is for the risky out-patient hysteroscopies to increase to 70% of the total, up from 59%. The Department for Health is not working to reduce pain and trauma for women—it is incentivising hysteroscopies without effective pain relief and is taking our choices away. It has to stop, and I hope the Minister will look at how she is going to stop it.

Those are our four asks of the Government, and I think the Minister will agree with me that they are entirely reasonable. I do not believe they would be massively expensive to implement, and we should also consider that current NHS practices may not be cost-effective. Women who have undergone a painful hysteroscopy may not return for other gynaecological tests and procedures. If they do not have those early preventive interventions, more costly interventions will be needed later.

Some action has already been taken. The issue has been raised with the national medical director of NHS England. I thank the Minister for that, and for launching her women’s health taskforce, which I would be interested to hear more about today.

I would like to say something about the history of the hysteroscopy campaign and the amazing women who have led it—I am delighted to see some of them in the
Gallery today. With their support, I have regularly been raising this issue in the House for four years now. I cannot say progress has been easy or swift. At times—I—have been ignored by the Government, despite strong cross-party support every time I have raised the issue. I have been left concerned that officials at the Department of Health, and some senior NHS managers, have not been willing to engage with the problem of women’s pain when the NHS is under financial stress.

However, this last year has been more hopeful. The Minister met me and a core group of campaigners last year, and listened with compassion to their stories. I believe she has taken this cause as her own. I am waiting with bated breath to hear what she is going to say today, and to hear about the rapid and dramatic progress we are going to be able to make on this issue over the coming year.

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jackie Doyle-Price): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown). I pay tribute to the work she has done to highlight this issue, which has affected many women over many years who have been left to suffer in silence.

As the hon. Lady said, there were 47,000 signatures on the campaign petition, which is an indication of just how many women have been badly affected by what is actually a common procedure. It does not matter that it is only one in four, which is probably the most generous estimate. It could be as low as one in 10; it does not matter. We are talking about individuals who have been badly affected and who have been traumatised to the point where it affects their ability to look after themselves in the future. Frankly, it is no value to the NHS to leave those women suffering in silence, and I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for sharing the experiences of the women who have been brave enough to come forward.

The hon. Lady set me a challenge. She is quite right to demand swift action, because this has been going on for many years. She had four asks. On the first two, I will work with her and the campaign to make sure we can deliver them. They are extremely reasonable, to be brutally frank. On her third ask, we need to make sure that we have sufficient resource to enable women to exercise genuine, informed choice about how they take this procedure. On the fourth ask, about the tariff, notwithstanding the guidance about what might be best practice in most cases, we need to make sure that the tariff does not encourage perverse incentives that will disadvantage women. At the heart of all this, we need to ensure that running through every piece of treatment for women with gynaecological conditions is the ability to make informed and empowered choices—genuine choices. In that respect, I see the hon. Lady as a strong ally in working towards far better treatment for all women at the hands of the NHS.

The hon. Lady has given a great voice to people who have been through such terrible experiences. She again shared some of the distressing experiences of women for whom current practice has not been good enough. She is right that in the past not enough attention has been paid to a common procedure that generates harm to far too many women. I hope that the very fact of our debate today will shine a light on the situation, because the more we can do to spread awareness, the more women are empowered to look after themselves when facing treatment in the NHS. I hope that she will take some reassurance from the fact that I will continue to work with her to improve women’s health outcomes.

I also want to put something else on the record: the hon. Lady talked about a complete lack of humanity in how those women were treated. I would not be the first to say this—I have spoken to many female colleagues across the House as well—but we often feel that, when our reproductive organs are not being used for the purpose of having children, they are just an inconvenience. The NHS needs to do better. She mentioned my women’s health taskforce, and it is very much at the heart of that. As we go through life, the virtue of having our reproductive organs brings morbidities which are not always treated well in the NHS. We need to do better.

Hysteroscopy, as the hon. Lady explained, is a useful tool in the diagnosis and treatment of a number of conditions, such as the investigation of heavy menstrual bleeding, which affects as many as one in four women between the ages of 15 and 50. That gives some indication of just how many women might consider the procedure. Hysteroscopy is also used to treat fibroids and polyps, which are conditions that can cause long-term symptoms of pain and discomfort. The procedure is without doubt useful in treating women, so hysteroscopies have a role, but as she illustrated beautifully, they can be invasive and traumatic. We need only think about what the procedure involves to understand how traumatic it can be when it becomes painful.

Women’s least expectation of going through the procedure—this is crucial—is that they should be treated with sympathy and respect. They should also have full understanding before undertaking such an experience. As the hon. Lady explained, however, often women find themselves in profound shock at what is happening, and it does not always take place in the most appropriate setting. We clearly need to do better. Information is crucial in that regard: we need to ensure that nothing comes as a surprise.

I encourage women to access the NHS webpage on hysteroscopy, which includes information on what the procedure involves, the likely recovery period and the alternative procedures available. It notes that experiences of pain during a hysteroscopy can vary considerably from one woman to another but—the hon. Lady highlighted this point—I do not think that it properly reflects that, for women who have never had children, the pain can be particularly acute. We should consider the question whether it is ever appropriate for women who have not had children to have the procedure. Clearly, from the evidence she has presented to me, that is where the highest risk is.

I also feel strongly that merely giving information is not enough. Not only is this about providing clarity about what will happen and whether there are decision points for patients—some women will experience little or no pain, but for others it can be severe. We should also remember that for some women the hysteroscopy might be a first encounter with gynaecological services and that some might need to confront past pain or
trauma. The hon. Lady has illustrated that well today. It is concerning when medical professionals do not prepare patients for the treatment in a sensitive way.

I fully agree with the hon. Lady that when a woman is clearly suffering during the procedure, it should be stopped. In any case, consent means that at any point people should be able to request that a procedure is stopped. It horrified me to read some of the accounts that she shared, such as women being held down and told, in essence, “You’ve got to continue this treatment or it will be worse for you.” That sort of conversation does not belong in 21st-century Britain in our fantastic NHS. I think we would all agree, women need to be treated better in that regard.

I also agree that we need better training on pain relief and managing women who are to have what can be a traumatic procedure. For practitioners, gynaecological procedures might be an everyday thing, but us women who present ourselves for such a procedure might have to have an out-of-body experience to go through it, because it is not comfortable — [Interruption] — excuse me — have people engaged in that. We need more sensitivity — [Interruption.] Excuse me, Chair, I have a terrible cold.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has produced a guideline to provide clinicians with evidence-based information regarding outpatient hysteroscopy — [Interruption.] Excuse me — [Interruption.]

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. The Minister is clearly in some distress. She must feel that she has more to say, but it would be perfectly in order if she wished to conclude the debate at this point. How can I put this? In these troubled times, it is really nice to see the amount of co-operation taking place across the Chamber. We have established that there is a consensus, so if she feels that she is still in some distress, it is perfectly acceptable if she wishes me to put the question, or we can continue — it is her choice.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I give way to the hon. Member for West Ham.

Lyn Brown: I am really grateful to the Minister for her response thus far. I have found her, to be honest, to be the only Minister I have been able to have proper conversations with about such issues who has understood them. I am grateful. However, I honestly believe that we need to do something about the fourth ask. I am a fairly strong woman, but even I was in such a position: I had requested a hysteroscopy with general anaesthetic, but the hospital spent an hour of its time trying to talk me into having one without anaesthetic. I am in a high-risk category of being an older woman and of not having had a child, but I had to beat off the medic who was trying to use every piece of emotional blackmail that she could to get me to agree — the cost to the NHS, taking up resources, the possibility that I had cancer or of a long wait, and so on. It was an uncomfortable conversation. If we do not get rid of the perverse financial incentives, even women as strong as me will be browbeaten.

Jackie Doyle-Price: I thank you, Mr Howarth, and the hon. Lady for the generosity of allowing me to recover myself. We can tell it is December, because we all have colds — thank you very much.

In the short time I have left, I will address the specific issue of the tariff and the possible incentives, which I know the hon. Lady is particularly concerned about. She is right that there is a best practice tariff that incentivises care in a day-case setting with no anaesthetic, just pain relief. That tariff is agreed with the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, but it is revising its guidance. I want to engage the hon. Lady and the campaign group in that process through the women’s health taskforce, so that we can all satisfy ourselves that the guidance is appropriate. She is absolutely right: if someone such as her or me — women Members of Parliament — cannot look after ourselves, neither can anyone else, and I have heard many tales of people often feeling diminished at the hands of the NHS. She and I have the opportunity to use our voices to ensure that women get a better deal.

I again thank the hon. Lady for all her work. I look forward to continuing to work with her to ensure that all women who face that procedure can do so with sensitive treatment and appropriate pain relief.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
Leaving the EU: State Aid, Public Ownership and Workers’ Rights

[Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I beg to move.

That this House has considered state aid, public ownership and workers rights after the UK leaves the EU.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and to have been selected to sponsor this important debate. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and the Minister. Their presence underlines the importance of this issue.

I do not need to spell out that we are having this debate in the context of what appears to be gridlock in Parliament. There is no clear consensus about what priorities should shape our future relationship with the EU. Today was supposed to be a day on which we made at least one decision, but even that is no longer the case. I wanted this debate to take place outside the main Chamber to ensure that its content was not considered purely in the context of the withdrawal agreement and the political declaration. Instead, I wanted it to inform the wider, ongoing debate about what the future relationship might look like.

I have chosen to consider these three policy areas for three reasons: first, because they are tools with which the UK Government could transform our economy and society for the better; secondly, because I believe that there is public support for their use by the UK Government; and, thirdly, because I am concerned that there is some friction between the effective use of these tools and EU law. This year, research by the Institute for Public Policy Research concluded that the public want to take back control and expand the role of the state, not reduce it. It suggested that there is no mandate for a bucaneering Brexit based on a race to the bottom in pursuit of even freer trade.

For balance, I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that EU law bans all forms of public ownership. Nor am I suggesting that the EU prevents all forms of state aid. Indeed, there are several exemptions, and where there are no exemptions a member state can seek the approval of the European Commission. I will come on to workers’ rights later in my speech, but I acknowledge that the EU has sought to create a floor for minimum employment standards. In theory, it should prevent a race to the bottom. Those are, without doubt, important safeguards.

I was more than troubled to read that the withdrawal agreement referred only to the non-regression of labour standards. I am deeply worried that exiting on that basis would leave the British workforce exposed to the risk of seeing their statutory rights gradually eroded or falling behind those of their European counterparts.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way. She is right to have secured this debate in this Chamber. Before she moves on to employment rights, I want to take her back to state aid. How does she think it will be different, given that the UK helped to develop the EU’s state aid rules, and the withdrawal agreement says that there will be a level playing field, which suggests that the sort of things we see now will be incorporated?

Laura Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I will come on to that issue, and specifically the level playing field, later in my speech. I hope that I will answer his question shortly.

One would have to be wilfully blind to argue that there is no tension between EU law and the pursuit of a heightened role for the state in our economy. For now, I want to move on to discuss public ownership, which can take various forms. I am not advocating organisations that are owned by the Government but behave in the same way as for-profit companies, focusing on financial goals and insulated from democratic control, but the dogmatic obsession with privatisation in the UK in recent years has been exposed as a failed and outdated ideology. Hon. Members no doubt represent workers in their respective constituencies who were affected by the collapse of Carillion, which cost the taxpayer at least £148 million. There were also the failures of the east coast main line and Northern rail services, and the emergency takeover of Birmingham Prison—the list goes on.

Our public services have been siphoned off and are run by private companies interested only in extracting profits to line the pockets of their shareholders, instead of reinvesting them to improve the service or reduce consumer bills. The privatised water companies have paid out £18 billion in dividends to shareholders over the past 10 years.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very important point about how water companies work. In Wales, we have Dwâr Cymru—Welsh Water—which is a publicly owned company that reinvests in the water network and reduces people’s bills. There are very real examples of how water companies can work for people, and we have the best example in Wales.

Laura Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for that example.

In the name of efficiency, our public services have been handed to those offering the cheapest services, often at the expense of our public sector workers, who have paid the price with their pay, their terms and conditions and even their jobs. Public ownership does not just bring an end to such bad practices. Done right, it can be used to combat inequality, political disenfranchisement and underinvestment.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. If she wants a good idea of what workers’ rights will be like if we come out of Europe, she has only to look at the recent anti-trade union laws passed by the Government. That will give her a good idea of what will happen to workers’ rights. She talks about privatisation, and Crossrail will now cost an additional £2 billion. These are the issues that we have to consider. My third point is that there is no guarantee that the national health service will survive in its present form when it is opened up to predators from the United States. These are the issues
that, at the end of the day, affect people’s jobs and livelihoods. There is no attempt whatever to provide future funding for university research and development, which affects manufacturing in this country in a big way—I asked the Chancellor a question about this this morning. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Laura Smith: I agree with the points that my hon. Friend makes, and I share his concerns.

Economic democracy can empower groups and individuals who are otherwise excluded. Involving workers, the public and other stakeholders in economic decision making has both societal and economic benefits. Democratic participation can also enhance the effectiveness of publicly owned enterprises by tapping into grassroots forms of knowledge and the direct experience of employees and users of public goods and services. Democracy, if we are to view it as a vital part of popular sovereignty, must extend far beyond the ability to elect Governments every now and then. The active exercise of individual worker and community member ownership rights is a prerequisite of genuine democracy.

If those campaigning to leave the EU were at all serious about taking back control for the British people, they will recognise the role that democratic public ownership can play in tomorrow’s economy. It can be used to mobilise our economy in pursuit of other policy objectives. For example, democratic public ownership of our energy system could allow us to put tackling climate change at the heart of our energy system in a radical way, while protecting the industry’s workers throughout any energy transition. It is popular: opinion poll after opinion poll demonstrates that the public are crying out for more public ownership, even given the option of “whatever works”.

EU law specifically allows for the public ownership of a service provider, yet the treaty that contains that provision also sets out an economic policy based on an open market economy, with free competition and the liberalisation of services given special status. Some commentators have suggested that remaining subject to EU law will make the reversal of market liberalisation highly problematic for a UK Government who wished to do that.

To take the postal service as an example, the third postal services directive, adopted in 2008, established a clear floor for the postal market, ensuring that collection and delivery take place at least five days a week. At the same time, it has promoted competitiveness for its own sake, which has driven down standards and posed a threat. It fails to see the market as a natural monopoly, and insists that it must remain fully liberalised, restricting the UK Government’s ability to eliminate the market to sustain the publicly owned provider.

Although public ownership of the carrier is not prohibited, it is difficult to see how a UK Government who remain subject to EU law could create a public monopoly with workers and service users at its heart, and with the necessary cross-subsidisation to allow such services to thrive. As far as I am concerned, a true level playing field would establish regulations to ensure that private sector carriers could not undercut prices, and would include a re-establishment of collective bargaining, which I will mention later.

There are similar challenges in the energy sector. The European Court of Justice’s Essent ruling found that the Dutch ban on private ownership of shares in the energy sector amounted to a breach of free movement of capital. The experience in Germany shows that it is possible to create publicly owned energy companies to rival private energy suppliers, but only within the parameters of EU competition law. The recent fourth railway package poses similar challenges in the rail sector.

I briefly draw hon. Members’ attention to a recent dispute at Royal Bolton Hospital. In Alemo-Herron, the ECJ ruled that private employers that take on the provision of public services cannot be required to pay transferred staff the pay rises that they would have had if they had remained in the employment of the public sector. By prioritising the rights of private companies to business freedom over the rights of workers who find themselves in that situation, EU law creates a financial incentive to privatised our public services.

On state aid and public procurement, I recognise that the UK has not made full use of the flexibilities on offer to it as a member state. As with all other aspects of the debate, I do not blame the European Union for the pursuit of neo-liberal policies by successive UK Governments. This Government have certainly not needed any encouragement in that respect. I also accept that there will always have to be some rules to facilitate fair trade, but the EU state aid rules are far more stringent than those in the WTO subsidies regime.

Earlier this year, I called on the Government to provide funding to cover the cost of pay owed to care workers who were found to have been paid less than the minimum wage. The failure to do so risked bankrupting care providers and putting many vulnerable people at risk. The Government, however, had to discuss the issue with the European Commission because of concerns that state aid rules would prevent them from taking such action. I am not sure whether those discussions reached a conclusion before the Court of Appeal’s July ruling.

In addition to restricting the UK Government’s ability to react to certain economic events that threaten our industries, those state aid rules can restrict our ability to intervene proactively to support individual industries or domestic supply chains as part of a comprehensive industrial strategy.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and congratulate her on securing the debate. She is making some fair points, but I take issue with the last one. There has been a very effective deployment of state aid to expand broadband provision throughout the United Kingdom, which she surely welcomes as a positive boost to the UK’s infrastructure, and to help our public services. There are some good stories to tell, despite the general recognition that the level of state aid in the UK is much lower in comparison with that in many other EU countries.

Laura Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I know everybody says this, but I will come to that later, when I address broadband specifically. I agree that improving that infrastructure is essential.

The recent research from the IPPR that I mentioned earlier concludes that the public place more weight on returning powers to expand the use of state aid than to
deregulate, with 53% showing a preference for allowing the Government to support and protect our industries, while only 26% preferred conformity with EU state aid rules to secure a far-reaching EU trade deal.

The variation in WTO-plus agreements suggests to me that a bespoke trade deal could, in theory, include room for structural subsidies. Those could, for example, support industries of particular national value or natural monopolies, where cost reductions would be beneficial and would have no impact on other countries. In that sense, Brexit offers an opportunity to redefine what a true level playing field looks like.

The Communication Workers Union suggested that there would, in theory, be a strong argument for rolling out superfast broadband everywhere, supported by the state, which takes us back to the point made by the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). Not only is that a natural monopoly, but it is a driver of social and economic wellbeing, as he pointed out. A similar argument could be made for our post office network.

With regard to the withdrawal agreement as it stands, the Attorney General has made it quite clear that in the backstop, restrictions on state aid are hardwired, and new restrictions could be introduced even if they are not in our national interest. I would be grateful if the Minister clarified whether he expects our future relationship with the EU to be substantially different or based on a parallel system. In the same way, the EU procurement directive is far more restrictive than the WTO agreement on government procurement. I would support, for example, limiting eligibility for public procurement contracts to companies that can demonstrate ethical maximum pay ratios and gender pay ratios, yet the EU procurement directive raises questions as to whether that would be compatible with single market rules.

There will undoubtedly be risks to workers’ rights if we leave the EU. Parliament is currently considering a deal that refers only to “non-regression”, when it would surely have been possible to ensure that British workers enjoy at least the same statutory rights as their European counterparts, as part of what I would describe as a genuine level playing field. We must also consider collective bargaining. I do not want to stray into a debate on the benefits of collective bargaining, but suffice it to say that I believe that rolling out sectoral-level bargaining will bring far more than just improvements to workers’ wages or employment conditions, and, alongside other reforms, it can give workers a real stake in their industries, and is another prerequisite for democratising our economy.

Chris Elmore: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again, and she is making some important points. She has talked throughout about a level playing field for workers’ rights and state aid. Does she agree that it is extremely important that the UK Government work with both the Scottish and Welsh Governments where there are devolved responsibilities, to ensure that there is a level playing field? That applies particularly to future funding for communities such as mine, which received objective 1 and objective 2 status, and where Welsh Government Ministers are responsible, for example, for the NHS pay structure and, from next year, for teachers’ pay.

Laura Smith: I am grateful once again to my hon. Friend, who makes some excellent points on devolved Governments.

Long before the formation of the EU, British workers’ rights were largely gained through industrial organisation and collective bargaining. Many statutory rights that have been introduced have simply extended those rights so that they can be enjoyed universally by workers not covered by those collective agreements and contractual rights. Although I do not blame the EU for the declining role of trade unions in the British economy, I am concerned that it is heading in the same direction.

The level of collective bargaining coverage is falling across Europe, under pressure from troika policies. To highlight the direction of travel, a report prepared by the European Commission’s directorate-general for economic and financial affairs lists the following “employment-friendly reforms”: decreasing bargaining coverage; decreasing extension of collective agreements; decentralising bargaining systems; removing or limiting the favourability principle; and overall reduction of wage-setting power by trade unions. The same report lists other reforms not related to collective bargaining, including loosening the conditions for dismissals and decreasing notice periods and the level of severance payments.

We must also consider the fact that under EU law the four freedoms of business—to provide services, establish business, move capital and move labour—trump all other rights. I have already highlighted the Alemo-Herron case, in which the right of workers to the benefit of collective bargaining found in the UN charter, the European convention on human rights and the International Labour Organisation declaration was not mentioned. Also, the more well known cases of Viking and Laval, amplified by the Holship ruling, reinforce the fact that under EU law the right to take industrial action will always be treated as subservient to the four freedoms. Furthermore, the directives passed by the EU on individual employment rights have been limited in scope. For example, the agency workers directive appears helpful in principle, but is reported to have led to a massive increase in the number of agency workers across Europe who do not enjoy the same full rights as their directly employed counterparts.

That is not to dismiss the significance of EU-derived employment rights and, as I have said, I am more than disappointed to see that the Brexit deal as it stands refers only to non-regression. Our existing rights must be protected, and safeguards should have been included to ensure that British workers never fall behind their European counterparts, as part of that truly level playing field. However, as hon. Members look for alternatives to the discredited deal, we should also be conscious that the EU is not the beacon of workers’ rights that it is sometimes made out to be.

To conclude, I ask that for a moment we consider the historic vote to leave the EU. The national turnout was the highest ever for a UK-wide referendum and the highest for any national vote since the 1992 general election. Despite the main parties campaigning to remain and interventions from all sorts of interested parties about the impact that leaving would have on our economy, the public voted to leave the EU, albeit by a small
I am sure that everyone present is also aware of the research conducted by Lord Ashcroft that concluded that the three lowest social groups voted to leave by a majority of two thirds. In that same poll, the single reason most frequently given for voting to leave was the principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK. One year later, more than 80% of voters cast their vote for parliamentary candidates representing parties promising to respect the result of the referendum—a promise that I also made to the constituents whom I represent.

Since June 2016, I have done a lot of reflecting about what the result really meant. In the end, I decided that many complex and interacting factors probably influenced it, and that making sweeping generalisations would be unhelpful. One thing I concluded, however, as I am sure everyone present did, is that to ignore the result would be a profound and unforgivable mistake. The referendum was an extraordinary exercise of democracy. If the result in 2016 was anything, it was a demand for change by those who benefited the least from our economic status quo. What is more, it was an expression by a majority of the electorate—however small and for whatever reason—that that change was best achieved with the UK outside the EU.

Even if hon. Members do not feel that expanding public ownership, state aid or workers’ rights are desirable policies, I ask them to consider the long-term consequences of lending support to any deal that further hollows out our democracy or locks us into the economic status quo. I therefore strongly urge Members to reject the single market, along with its legal framework, should such an option appear before the House. To do so is not to retreat into isolationism, protectionism and nationalism; on the contrary, it could herald the beginning of a new internationalism.

Of course we want the fullest access to all markets for our businesses, but the expansion of international trade, including in services, has not required a single market or a similarly restrictive framework. We must be vigilant to ensure that any other deal includes the necessary protections, clarifications and exemptions, so that we can use such policy tools effectively to rebuild and empower our communities, our public services and our economy in every region of the UK. I believe that there is public support for a new type of economy, one in which the state plays a more active role, in which ownership by, and accountability to, the public is included, and in which those who work within those industries are rewarded properly for their labour.

2.55 pm

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): It is, as always, a great pleasure to see you in the Chair for this afternoon’s proceedings, Mr Hollobone.

I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) on securing this debate. In some respects it is timely, because the actions of the Prime Minister yesterday have perhaps moved us a little closer to a no-deal scenario, which would be catastrophic for jobs and our communities, although my argument is that that is not a new phenomenon.
bonfire of workers’ rights. That is why, even at this late stage. I appeal to Members on the Conservative and Labour Benches to join us to end the Brexit chaos. If they do not, or will not, they should not be surprised when Scotland unhooks the tow bar and takes us on a different path of independence.

2.59 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) on securing this important debate. I declare my interest as a proud lifelong trade unionist.

This debate is especially important because when the Prime Minister addressed the House yesterday, she gave the impression that the only concerns about her deal came from her own Benches and related entirely to the backstop. Let me say clearly and loudly to the Minister that is not the case for my constituents and working people across the country who want an agreement that protects both their jobs and their rights in those jobs. I will focus my speech on that.

Equality for part-time workers, maternity and paternity leave, health and safety standards, protections from discrimination and harassment, equal pay terms and regulation of working hours are among the basic labour standards won by the labour movement—not just in the UK, but across Europe—that are under threat from a Tory Brexit. The Minister may deny that but his colleagues have given the game away. The International Trade Secretary—the last man standing of the Prime Minister’s original three Brexiteers—was clear about his vision when he said:

“we must begin by deregulating the labour market”,

and that is

“intellectually unsustainable to believe that workplace rights should remain untouchable”.

The former Brexit Secretary, the right hon. Member for Esher and Walton (Dominic Raab), put it more bluntly when his book described British workers as

“among the worst idlers in the world.”

The track record of this Government speaks even louder than those words: a damaging and draconian Trade Union Act that attacks representatives of millions of working people across the UK, for instance. Tribunal fees caused a staggering drop in the number of workers able to bring claims against exploitative bosses. It is the same story even on an issue as basic as ensuring waiters can keep their own tips. If the Minister’s answer is to say the only reference to workers’ rights is in the section on “ensuring the proper functioning of the single customs territory” rather than protecting workers’ rights in itself, limiting it even further.

The Government could have given us a standstill clause, which would have given them a legally binding duty that workers and trade unions could enforce in the courts, but they decided not to. The Attorney General confirmed to the House last week that the “non-regression clauses...are not enforceable either by the EU institutions or by the arbitration arrangements under the withdrawal agreement.”—[Official Report, 3 December 2018; Vol. 650, c. 559.]

He made clear that he thought that was a good thing. That is a stark and telling contrast to the far tougher and enforceable requirements on state aid that my hon. Friend referred to. No wonder the Institute for Public Policy Research, among others, concluded that the non-regression clause was

“not sufficient to maintain current protections”.

Then, there is the political declaration. We have often heard on Brexit that the devil is in the detail, but the problem with the political declaration is that there is no detail. It does not even have legal effects. Any new Tory Prime Minister—hardly an unlikely prospect, from what we see of the party opposite me—could just rip it up. Its only reference to workers’ rights is in the section on “open and fair competition”, which tells us exactly how they are seen—simply a way to maintain fair competition.

We have always said that we want a future relationship where rights and protections are defended, preventing a race to the bottom. This agreement threatens to do the very opposite. It opens the door to a future where labour standards come second to the interests of big business, rights at work are watered down and a Conservative Government can dismantle yet more protections for workers and unions. The people I represent in Barnsley voted very clearly to leave. I respect that decision, but I do not believe they voted for a reduction in workers’ rights, jobs and prosperity. The question is not whether we leave but how we leave.

3.5 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I will not hold up the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) for very long, but I have just a couple of points that are too long to make as interventions; therefore, I felt the best thing to do would be to speak.

To pick up on the question of rights, a number of hon. Members spoke about a bonfire of rights that will come about as a result of our leaving the European Union. However, there is another organisation responsible for protecting those rights: the Council of Europe. We ignore that at our peril. I know that it is seen as a great thing in this country that we send no journalists along to Council of Europe meetings—we send along our delegation, if they can be spared by the Whips Office, but it is always a secondary thing—and yet the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) mentioned a case that was heard by the European Court of Human Rights. That does not belong to the European Union; it belongs to the Council of Europe, an independent organisation set up in 1948 with the aim of protecting
human rights in Europe. The ECHR, which the Council of Europe looks after, is a unique body. It is one where, as council members, we elect the judges to serve for individual countries, so it has a democratic legitimacy.

I think back to the various meetings that we have held over the past few years, and I can assure the hon. Lady that employee rights, whether in specific circumstances or more generally, have been on the agenda for discussion on many occasions. For example, on at least one occasion we have looked at the rights of employees to access information about themselves and their cases, in order to take forward what they want to do. This conversation seems to be a bit one sided. So far it has not looked at the bigger picture or taken into account what the Council of Europe does.

Stephanie Peacock: I think I am right in saying that the hon. Gentleman is arguing that the Council of Europe can help to protect workers’ rights, but the people I represent, and a lot of those who voted to leave, voted so that this place could protect workers’ rights. Surely, it is the democratically elected Government’s responsibility to ensure that workers’ rights are protected.

John Howell: That is an interesting question. We give up our rights to decide things for ourselves in a number of situations. We give up the right to our own sovereignty by belonging to the United Nations and to NATO. To a certain extent, we give it up by belonging to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. Most importantly, we give up our rights to some aspects of our sovereignty by being members of the Council of Europe. It is not right for the hon. Lady to look at this issue solely in terms of one or two organisations; she needs to look at a third organisation—the Council of Europe—which is there to provide just that sort of reassurance to people about their human rights, which I think she and her colleagues are, and have been, looking for.

I want to touch on Birmingham prison, which the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich opportunistically mentioned in passing. This morning I participated in a Justice Select Committee sitting in which we questioned senior members of the Prison Service about what happened at Birmingham Prison. A key point relates to provisions in the contract with G4S not to hold it to account in many ways that we would normally expect. All of us, on both sides of the political fence, questioned those witnesses about the legitimacy of excluding those areas from the contract and how they could manage them.

Birmingham Prison is a good example of the mixture of public and private collaboration, in that we have public collaboration through the Ministry and the Department, which hold those running the prisons to account rather than having to run them themselves. We asked about the extent to which windows had been broken and not fixed, and why no one had been held to account and what had happened. At the end of the sitting we specifically asked the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice what would happen at the end of that examination. We got a firm statement that the contract would possibly at some stage go back to G4S when we could all be assured that it would be able to keep prisoners in the state in which we would expect them to be kept and look after them properly. That is a good combination of private and public sector partnerships in action.

3.11 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, particularly as I was not on the speakers list. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for making such a strong case. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) on the Front Bench and I welcome the new Minister. I hope he enjoys his portfolio for as long as it lasts.

I want to make three brief points that it is important to make, as they sometimes do not feature in debates. Although we are here in this important debate to escape from Brexit, it very much relates to Brexit or what might result from it. First, when I have been involved in trying to save companies and looking at how the public sector can get involved in that, I have always been told that we cannot do so because of state aid rules. I have never understood what those state aid rules are. I am sure that there are state aid rules that apply, and that the European Court of Justice or the European Court of Arbitration—whichever it is—can eventually adjudicate on whether public money was used properly, but that is at best years down the line.

My point is that the argument about state aid rules has always been used to effectively allow national Governments—in this case ours—a cop-out, when what they are really saying is, “We don’t want to help this company or industry, and we now have a wonderful excuse that gives some credibility to our rationale for so doing.” It was applied to steel in Redcar, and I can cite local cases where it was up to the national Government to put their money where their mouth was and where, if they had really wanted to save a company or industry, they could have.

I know a little about the agriculture industry and the different boxes—the amber, the red, the green and the blue. This relates not only to the EU, but to the WTO, and I was pleased to hear what my hon. Friend said about that. We know that the WTO rules are laxer, but this is about the framework within which the EU wants to operate. The most subsidised agriculture system in the world is in America. Where did the term “pork-barrel politics” come from? It is about putting money into the American mid-west to win elections. It is against any notion of free and fair trade, so I take it with a pinch of salt when I am told that state aid rules are so restrictive that we cannot do anything.

In many ways I see that in contract law. Perhaps the days are long gone, but when we put forward a contract, the Official Journal of the European Union was always waved in our face and we were told the contract had to go through a system of rigorous assessment, yet when it came down to it, we could employ local labour when we wanted to, but that was always seen as not being possible.

My second point is about fairness in the application of state aid. I am grateful for the Library’s papers on this. When we look at state aid as a percentage of GDP, we are always in the bottom quartile. We choose not to invest anything like the sums of money that other countries do in supporting our industry. That must be
the case because so many of our railways, water companies, waste companies and energy companies are owned by foreign national concerns—even nationalised concerns. So something happens elsewhere within the EU that, again, we choose not to follow as a national state. I worry that we use the EU as an Aunt Sally. Other countries seem able to control our major companies through their public sectors. Nothing illustrates that more than Hinkley Point, which we have effectively handed over not only to the French state, but to the Chinese state, which is funding it. Of course, China is not part of the EU, but it is part of the WTO, and I would love to know why, when we try to do things in this country involving the public sector, we are so much more constrained.

Thirdly, I share my hon. Friend’s concern, and I worry about where we will go after the end of March if we are out of the EU or whatever state we will be in. There is an inclination that we could witness a race to the bottom. I worry, for example, that our regulatory framework will be overseen by the Competition and Markets Authority, which, from my experience, has no real interest in labour standards or trying to protect trade union rights, which my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) talked about. We ignore that at our peril and might find not only that we have leapt from the frying pan into the fire, but that the fire has completely engulfed us. There will be the threat of a race to the bottom. The idea that we will become a global nation basically means that we will simply cut our wages and conditions, which will apparently yield a wonderful competitive advantage.

I have made those three points because the debate is important. It is apposite because it comes on the back of all the other shenanigans that have been going on over the past few days about whether we are leaving and on what terms. This is important. The British public might be asked for a second opinion on our relationship with the EU. It would at least help if we could put to them what really goes on, rather than some of the foreign national concerns—even nationalised concerns.

I think that the hon. Gentleman is mistaken. It is important to have a positive narrative. As my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow South West and for Glasgow East have said, the narrative is positive, and it is about what we can do and what we choose not to do.

3.19 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone. As you can hear, I am going to battle through my speech this afternoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) has called me a “wee sowl”—all I can say is that interventions will be very much encouraged during my remarks. First, I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for securing this debate, which is timely, given the game playing that we have seen over the past couple of days by the Government.

Yesterday I was expecting to address the House on the deal, but we found out that the debate was cancelled. Another reason why the debate is timely is that yesterday I was going to make the argument I made during the EU referendum campaign—to remain and reform. I understand the Lexity argument that the EU can be seen as a capitalist club, but my view was then, and is now, that the answer to neo-liberalism is not to leave for more neo-liberalism and deregulation. I fear that that is happening and very much regret that successive UK Governments, but particularly Conservative ones, have had a disgraceful record on applying for EU social funds. It is worth reflecting on that.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), my friend and trade union comrade, made a point about people in lower income brackets—the same ones who would have benefited if former UK Governments had taken a more proactive approach on EU social funds. I am thinking particularly of the one for food poverty. However, the UK Government did not apply, so France and Germany got €450 million from the EU to help with food poverty, and because the UK did not apply it got the same amount of money as Malta, which was €12 million. Like many others who have spoken, I have a concern that we could end up with the UK leaving the EU and signing trade deals that would make the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership look moderate.

The debate is timely also in relation to the current Government’s direction of travel on public sector delivery and the management of the economy. Already, Carillion, which was providing public sector services, has collapsed. I have previously warned here, and in written questions, about issues with Interserve, which looks like being the next Carillion.

We are also in the ludicrous position where the current Government are considering privatising veterans’ services. This must be one of few nations that would even consider that. We know the current Government’s approach to workers’ rights because of—to correct my friends in the Labour party—the “anti-trade union” Act, which is what we should call the Trade Union Act 2016.

The Government, following the passage of the 2016 Act, were forced to consider e-balloting, but almost three years down the line they have done nothing to help with e-balloting for industrial action ballots. That is relevant to the present debate because if the EU referendum had been conducted according to the same rules as a trade union industrial action ballot, it would not have been possible to prosecute Brexit. The result would have failed to comply with the 40% rule that the Government insist on applying to trade unions in industrial action ballots. I shall take a sip of water now, Mr Hollobone—if no one is keen to intervene on me.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East has said, over the past few decades Westminster Governments have left key Scottish industries, and industries across the UK, without support. There is now a real fear that we face a Tory Brexit race to the bottom. In decades when Thatcherism, it has been said, “swept like a wrecking ball through the mines, the steel industry, the car factories, shipbuilding and engineering and oversaw the demise of the communities which had built their livelihoods around them” it was the Conservative Government who referred to miners as “the enemy within”. It was often felt that the same sentiment was directed towards many working communities. That Government’s attitude to many of those communities can be summed up by the classic Proclaimers song “Letter from America”:

“Bathgate no more
Linwood no more
Methil no more
Irvine no more”.

Let us not forget that the period from 1981 to 1983 was the worst recession since the 1930s, destroying one fifth of the industrial base and doubling unemployment. That was before war was declared on the miners. The

David Linden: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Chris Stephens: I am relieved to find that someone wants to intervene on me.

David Linden: I am grateful to that wee sowl my hon. Friend; my question is in 22 parts so he may as well take a seat, to quote “The West Wing”.

In all seriousness, my hon. Friend is rightly listing the communities decimated by the horrific economic policy of the Thatcher Government. Does he understand that there is a clear correlation between many of the communities he named and voting yes to independence in 2014? They realised that the only way they could get fairness in a rejuvenated local economy would be through their own Government having the power to act.

Chris Stephens: As someone representing the constituency with the second highest individual number of yes voters in the 2014 referendum, I think my hon. Friend is right. The reason why the issue is important is that European Governments supported their steel industries against cheap imports. They supported their industrial base at a time when the UK did not. There are fears at the moment, with the current Government refusing to match Scottish Government funding for the Tayside deal to support Michelin workers who face job losses. It just goes to show that the “nasty party” tag is still alive and well.

The Scottish Government have had to intervene to help commercial shipbuilding on the Clyde, finding a new buyer for the Ferguson shipyard, and they have also intervened in relation to securing a new owner for the steelworks. For the first time, following a campaign and the amendment of the law, the Scottish Government have secured the power to allow a public-sector bid for a rail franchise in Scotland. It was Westminster that sold off public services, not the European Union, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East described very well. It is the Scottish Government who are pressing ahead with plans for a national investment bank and public energy company.

Workers’ rights are a passion of mine. I was a trade union activist before I arrived in this place. It was the European Union that forced successive Westminster Governments to improve workers’ rights. The pregnant workers directive of 1992 guaranteed women a minimum of 14 weeks’ maternity leave, and that forced the then Labour Government to go further.

The European Court of Justice made it clear that any discrimination against a woman because of pregnancy or maternity leave is sexism and should be treated as such. It was EU law that provided that parents must be allowed 18 weeks’ unpaid leave from work to look after a child. The equal treatment directive led to UK law banning discrimination on the grounds of age, religion or sexual orientation. Indeed, that directive is helping many women, particularly in the public services, to make equal pay claims. I am grateful for that, and should declare that I am currently an equal pay claimant against my former employer—but I shall move swiftly on.

EU rules adopted in 2008 provide that temporary workers must be treated equally with directly employed staff, which includes the giving of access to the same amenities and collective services. We know from research that 41 of the 65 new health and safety regulations introduced in the UK since 1997 have come from the European Union. The Scottish National party takes the issue of tackling exploitative working practices extremely seriously, and we oppose the “anti-trade union” Act 2016.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East is campaigning for the UK Government to stop discriminating against young people and ensure they get a real living wage. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) is promoting the Unpaid Trial Work Periods (Prohibition) Bill, and I recommend the well-crafted and beautifully written Workers (Definition and Rights) Bill that seeks to simplify the status of workers in law and eliminate zero-hours contracts. I thank everyone who has contributed to this debate. SNP Members oppose neo-liberalism. We do not see Brexit as a way to enhance neo-liberalism, and if it turns out to be it will be a disaster for this country—it will be a disaster for the United Kingdom.

3.30 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) on securing this important debate, which is now the only piece of Brexit business tabled today—not what I was expecting.

State aid, public ownership, and workers’ rights are the critical building blocks of our nation’s economic model, and getting them right will be crucial to our future prosperity and the nature of any post-Brexit settlement. As my hon. Friend expressed so clearly, the Brexit vote has exposed the flawed foundations of our economic model. After decades of crying that there is no alternative” to neo-liberal privatisation, laissez-faire economics, and deregulated labour markets, it was a Conservative Chancellor who, after the Brexit vote, threatened to “change our economic model”. Of course, he was actually proposing an acceleration of neoliberal reform without the constraints of European law—a “race to the bottom” in workers’ rights and protections, as the Leader of the Opposition put it in Lisbon last week.

The European Union delivers and guarantees important rights to British workers that we cannot allow to be taken away, but it has not always fulfilled the promise of a social Europe. I was also in Lisbon last week, representing the British Labour party at the congress of the party of European Socialists. I told them that no matter what happens with Brexit, we must all fight for socialist values within Europe: strengthening the rights of workers and trade unions, and ending austerity and wage suppression.
Yesterday in France President Macron finally recognised that French working people need higher incomes, not lower ones. France is to privatisate even if it should not be. In the street, for leaders to have our point. Here in Britain the real issue underlying Brexit is that working people want and deserve real rights, a real voice, and better lives. The Brexit deal must therefore defend what we have won in a European context by upholding workers' rights and social protections, and if Brexit does not mean that, it is a total fraud against working people. The deal must also allow us to make further gains in the context of our continuing economic relationship with Europe, whether by strengthening European works councils, or restoring public ownership of public goods. That is what the Leader of the Opposition meant when he said in Lisbon:

“As socialists and trade unionists, we will work together to help build a real social Europe, a people's European socialist Europe”.

What should that mean in practice for state aid, public ownership, and workers’ rights? As many hon. Friends have eloquently said, Labour Members reject the Government's position that the best the state can do for the economy is get out of the way of the private sector. In the words of the renowned economist Mariana Mazzucato, we believe in an entrepreneurial state that stands shoulder to shoulder with the private sector. We are not talking about uneconomic subsidies for dying industries or failing firms; we want targeted interventions that support a prosperous, competitive, growing, and technologically driven economy that works for all. Yes, that should include public ownership where there is a natural monopoly or important public goods are at stake. Mazzucato also observed that, much like taxation and regulation, state aid rules are often used as an excuse for no investment and general inertia, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) pointed out, that is particularly true for the UK Government. One example of that is in my region, the north-east, where the steel sector was allowed to decline and suffer because of Conservative inaction.

The UK has never gone as far as European Union law allows to enable the state to support the UK economy. As a percentage of GDP, we spend far less on state aid than our European neighbours—roughly 0.3%, compared with 0.6% in France and 1.2% in Germany. Public ownership is common on the continent, guaranteed by article 345 of the Lisbon treaty, which allows countries to make their own decisions on ownership. SNCF is France's national state-owned railway company, and the German energy sector is experiencing a return to public and communal ownership. In this country we have Scottish Water, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden). Some French and German public companies even own parts of our privatised utilities, and in that far-left enclave, the Netherlands, private ownership of water companies is illegal.

Although it is true that European Union members states are bound by a requirement to provide aid only on the basis of a level playing field, public service compensation does not constitute state aid where it applies to services of general economic interest. There are economic activities that deliver outcomes in the overall public good that would not be supplied by the market—or would be supplied under different conditions regarding objective quality, safety, affordability, equal treatment or universal access—without public intervention. That could refer to a number of services, so will the Minister commit to report back to Parliament on which of our services of general economic interest we need to protect?

Before entering Parliament I had a job as Head of Telecoms Technology for Ofcom, the communications regulator, and I spent many months comparing our use of provisions for services of general economic interest with the way they were used by our European neighbours. I can confirm to the House, and especially my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, that we do not use such provisions. The Government do not even seem committed to protecting our public services in new trade deals. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that future trade deals do not threaten the public ownership of crucial national assets such as our NHS?

As my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) remarked, regardless of whether people voted leave or remain in the European Union referendum, no one voted for worse rights at work. Well, at least not at their work. Members of the European Research Group may well have voted for worse rights for others, while wishing to retain and indeed expand their privileges as parliamentarians. They want working people back in the middle ages, but not the sanctions that MPs received at that time. A poll commissioned by the Institute for Public Policy Research in February this year found that more than 70% of people want European Union rights at work to be strengthened or maintained after Brexit—more than double the number who thought they should be watered down.

The Prime Minister has repeatedly promised to maintain workers’ rights post Brexit. For example, she said at her party conference in 2016 that “existing workers’ legal rights will continue to be guaranteed in law—and they will be guaranteed as long as I am Prime Minister.” Only last month, she assured the House that her deal successfully safeguarded workers’ rights. Yet, as colleagues pointed out, this Government repeatedly voted down Labour amendments to the European Union (Withdrawal) Bill that would have required primary legislation if future Governments sought to reduce workers’ rights. With that rejection, our rights are left vulnerable to deregulation by ministerial diktat.

By not allowing new European works councils to form or having a contingency plan to replace them, the Tories would leave British workers at a disadvantage to their European Union colleagues. Will the Minister commit to reversing the decision to scrap European works councils?

The Government’s withdrawal agreement contains significant flaws with regard to workers’ rights. As was pointed out, one of the provisions of the backstop is a non-regression clause on labour standards, which would prevent either party from lowering protections below their current levels. However, it allows for some divergence, meaning that a UK Government would still be able to water down workers’ rights—a worrying possibility given this Government’s track record on labour protections.

Moreover, the non-regression clause would not require us to update our labour legislation alongside the European Union, meaning that over time we could end up with significantly poorer protections. That is a real concern
given the growth of the so-called gig economy. Only last month, Tory MEPs joined the UK Independence party in voting against new rights for gig economy workers in the European Parliament. Will the Minister commit to updating workers’ rights in line with European best practice following the end of the transition period?

My party has pledged to protect workers and their hard-won rights, reject no deal as a viable option, and negotiate transitional arrangements to avoid a cliff edge for the UK economy and workers. We have pledged to ensure workers are represented on company boards and to require firms with more than 250 employees to set up ownership funds, making workers part-owners of their companies.

My party will make full use of the powers the state has, and should have, to build an economy that supports workers’ rights, trade union rights, innovation and industry in every region of our country, and that works for my constituents in Newcastle and for the constituents of the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell)—in short, an economy that works for the many, not the few.

3.42 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Laura Smith) for securing this important debate. There were passionate and learned contributions from the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), from my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell) and the hon. Member for Glasgow South—

Chris Stephens: South West.

Chris Skidmore: Apologies—the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens). I was deeply impressed by the hon. Gentleman’s ability to speak through his vocal impairment; he was cutting quite loudly through it by the end of his speech. We also heard from the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah) and, last but not least, the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew), whom I thank for his generous congratulations on my fifth day in my new role.

Chi Onwurah: I regret that I did not take the opportunity to welcome the Minister to his new role and I wish him every success for the period he occupies it.

Chris Skidmore: I am deeply grateful for those kind words. I am getting stuck into the job by appearing at this debate, but I am here to represent the views of my Department as a replacement Minister. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), the Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Corporate Responsibility, sends her profuse apologies that she has been unable to attend. She is representing the Department in the debate on the Accounts and Reports (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2018 in Committee corridor. I am here in her place to represent the Department’s views.

Let me start with what state aid rules are and why they exist, what is and is not state aid, and when it is allowed. Put simply, state aid is Government support or subsidy of an economic operator that gives it an advantage it could not get on the open market and distorts competition in the single market. The EU has tough rules governing the way subsidies can be given, to stop companies from getting an unfair advantage over their competitors and to ensure that countries with deep pockets do not subsidise their companies to the detriment of companies in other member states. However, where there are good policy justifications for state aid—where the benefit from giving aid outweighs the potential harm of a subsidy—the rules enable aid to be given.

Not all Government spending is aid. In fact, less than 1% of UK Government spending meets the technical definition of state aid. The state aid rules are about supporting fair and open competition, and the UK has long been a vocal proponent of them. The rules exist to stop countries from subsidising their industries unfairly, which would put businesses out of business and workers out of work.

A second misconception is that state aid rules prevent nationalisation. As long as the Government do not pay more than the market price for any assets acquired, the rules do not prevent that. However, the rules oblige the state to act as a normal market investor. That is good, because it prevents public authorities from unfairly distorting markets. State aid rules are neutral on public ownership and on the detail of spending decisions.

State aid rules are also fundamental to any free trade agreement. The political declaration on the framework for the future relationship between the EU and the UK recognises that. Free and fair trade is not possible if one party is able to subsidise without restraint. In a single customs territory that allowed the free trade of goods, as provided for in the draft withdrawal agreement, neither the EU nor the UK would be able to apply tariffs as measures against unfair subsidies by the other party. To ensure fair and open competition, it is absolutely necessary for the same state aid rules to apply consistently within the single customs territory, not to be frozen or disapplied for one bit of it.

I turn to workers’ rights, which have been the predominant topic of discussion. It is important to be clear that we are not making a choice between protecting state aid rules and protecting workers’ rights. As a responsible Government, we will work both to prevent unfair subsidies and to protect the rights of workers. The UK—we had several history lessons through some of the learned contributions to the debate—has a long-standing record of ensuring that workers’ rights are protected. Those include employment and equality rights, and protections for health and safety at work.

The decision to leave the European Union does not change that. This Government have made a firm commitment to protect workers’ rights and to maintain the protections covered in the Equality Acts.

Chris Stephens: Can the Minister tell us when the Government plan to publish their proposals in response to the Taylor review?

Chris Skidmore: In terms of the Government’s commitment and the commitments I am giving today, I reflect that the Prime Minister said recently in the House that

“We already go further than EU minimum standards, including on annual leave, paid maternity leave, flexible leave, paternity leave and pay, and parental leave, because we know that the first
The Government have been clear that they will take the recommendations of the Taylor review forward.

**Stephanie Peacock:** Further to the intervention by the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), the Minister has not given the House a date. If he is that committed to the response, can he tell us when it will be?

**Chris Skidmore:** I appreciate the hon. Members’ request for a specific date. I will have to fall back on a position of ensuring that my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood, the responsible Minister in this policy area, will write to both the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Glasgow South West setting out clearly the next stages and the time frame for them.

Given our record in comparison to the EU standards in many areas, it is not surprising that Eurofound, the EU agency for work-related policy, ranks the UK as the second best country in the EU for workplace wellbeing, behind only Sweden, and the best country for workplace performance.

There has been some discussion about the EU withdrawal agreement. That will ensure that workers’ rights enjoyed under EU law will continue to be available in UK law after we have left the EU. That includes rights derived from EU law, such as the working time directive and the agency workers’ directive. Specifically within the withdrawal agreement, the UK is seeking a stringent and legally binding withdrawal agreement with the EU not to roll back on employment standards. A joint committee would ensure that the UK was keeping to the agreement at a political level. There will be no roll-back of rights, including collective bargaining rights, when we leave the EU.

**John Howell:** I remind my hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood of the right to organisation, of the right to strike, of the right to bargain collectively, the right to social security, the right to social and medical assistance, the right to the social, legal and economic protection of the family, and so on. Those are just some of the rights protected by this Council of Europe treaty that we signed up to in 1961 and it stands completely outside whatever is agreed in the withdrawal agreement.

**Chris Skidmore:** I thank my hon. Friend for putting that on the record. I listened to his speech on the Council of Europe and know he is a dedicated member of it. I pay tribute to his work, which often goes unheralded in this place. We know that there are many colleagues from across all parties who do a great deal of work on behalf of the United Kingdom at the Council of Europe, and it is right that that is recognised in this debate.

I hope the Government’s commitment, in both the withdrawal agreement and statements that we have made, will give certainty and continuity to employees and employers alike, creating stability in which the UK can grow and thrive. The political declaration on our future relationship makes it clear that we will build on this for the future deal with the EU. We want to ensure that the future economic partnership of the EU is underpinned by measures that ensure fair and open competition. Obviously, a rigorous approach to state aid is a critical component of that and provides a foundation for ensuring smooth trade and a partnership based on high market access. That is reflected in the political declaration, which establishes state aid as a crucial part of the level playing field commitments. The text makes clear that the precise nature of these commitments will depend on the scope and depth of the future relationship and the negotiations to take place.

There is no choice between taking the state aid rules or protecting workers’ rights; the Government recognise the fundamental importance of both.

**Stephanie Peacock:** The Minister talked about state aid and workers’ rights. Can he explain why the rules on state aid are both tougher and clearly more enforceable, in contrast to those on workers’ rights?

**Chris Skidmore:** I am not going to pre-judge what is taking place as we move towards a clear, definable free trade agreement with the European Union and the discussions that will happen after the political declaration. We have made that commitment, but actually we want to make sure that the United Kingdom has the ability to ensure that UK rights are clear, definable and stronger. They are already stronger than those in many European countries. We will continue to ensure that we have the reputation I mentioned: being the second best country in the EU for workplace wellbeing, behind only Sweden.

It is important for our global reputation that we maintain that.

On the point about the EU workers council, if the EU withdrawal agreement is not approved we will still unilaterally protect workers’ rights in relation to European workers councils, as far as we can. However, to protect them fully, we require a deal with the EU, which sets the rules governing the establishment of a new European workers council. That is why I believe that the withdrawal agreement is so important to ensuring that we have no reduction in workers’ rights.

We will go further than the minimum labour market standards guaranteed in a withdrawal agreement. The Government will protect workers’ rights to ensure that they keep pace with changing labour markets. I hope the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich agrees that our approach on these vital issues will help secure the best possible deal for the UK as we leave the European Union.

3.55 pm

**Laura Smith:** Thank you to my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Stroud (Dr Drew), to the hon. Members for Glasgow East (David Linden) and for Henley (John Howell), and to all other hon. Members who made interventions. I thank the SNP Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), who is incredibly brave, battling through his cold—well done. I also thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend...
the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah), and the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), who stepped in at the last moment.

There have been some excellent contributions on the importance of workers’ rights and the popularity of public ownership. I agree that it is UK Governments who are responsible for the privatisation of public services and the casualisation of labour.

On the points made by the hon. Member for Henley, my concern was precisely that the rights of workers in the charter in the European Court of Human Rights were not mentioned in the Court of Justice of the European Union ruling in the Alemo-Herron case. I was not criticising the ECHR or the Council of Europe—quite the opposite, in fact. I was pointing out that the workers’ rights afforded by the ECHR, which appeared to have no bearing in the Alemo-Herron case, were trumped by the four freedoms.

On the point about Birmingham prison, I stand by my view that the evidence is mounting up rapidly. The obsession with outsourcing and privatisation is a failed project that is costing the taxpayer and the workers in those services an awful lot, while letting down those who rely on the services.

Finally, the current withdrawal agreement means dynamic alignment with EU state aid rules, so it is important that we gain a full understanding of them and the likely direction of travel. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud that the UK Government have made conscious decisions not to aid industry in the way that other EU countries have done. The point is that our national Parliament understands and is happy that the future state aid framework and regulations around public ownership allows for proper democratic debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered state aid, public ownership and workers’ rights after the UK leaves the EU.

3.57 pm

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cat welfare.

I am grateful to you, Mr Hollobone, and I am grateful that the Minister is in his place. This debate about cat welfare is linked to a private Member’s Bill that I presented to the House in July 2018, after speaking to a fantastic local charity in my constituency, Animals Lost and Found in Kent. To be frank, I was not aware of its great work until we were looking at the national volunteers charity day and my wonderful staff member Finlay, who is sitting in the Gallery behind me, said, “This is a list of charities in the constituency. Which one would you like to go and visit?” So I said, “Animals Lost and Found in Grange Road, Gillingham. Let’s go and see the great work they do.”

Meeting Natasha and Dee was inspirational. They are two individuals who do not have a lot of money, but they do have an amazing heart in wanting to do the right thing and ensuring that animals that have been abandoned, lost or injured get the support they need. I went to the back of their house and I saw a number of cats who had been neglected, injured or abandoned. I said to Natasha and Dee, “What can I do to help you?” They said that the legislation needed to be looked at.

There are 11.1 million cats in our country, who are part of our everyday families. They bring immense happiness to each and every one of us.

**Sir Greg Knight** (East Yorkshire) (Con): I am delighted that my hon. Friend secured the debate. Is he aware that in 2016 the press reported 202 cats as having been shot in the United Kingdom, with 90% shot in either England or Wales, where we have more lax laws on air rifles? Does he agree that we should look at tightening up the law on the possession and ownership of airguns?

**Rehman Chishti** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that important information from 2016. I was made aware of specific points about firearms, banning electric training aids and the control of airguns by the People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals—the wonderful charity that does great work in this area—but I was not aware of his specific point. It is absolutely right that we do everything we can on the regulation of those firearms to prevent that kind of completely unacceptable behaviour and to ensure that the welfare of animals is protected at every level.

The amazing joy that these wonderful animals bring to our lives also means that we have a responsibility to do everything we possibly can to ensure that their welfare is protected.

**Laura Smith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Stapeley Grange Cattery in my constituency, which does an amazing job at looking after and re-homing cats. I also pay tribute to my own cat, Pudding, who is a remarkable addition to our family.
Rehman Chishti: I, too, pay tribute to the work of that cattery and congratulate the hon. Lady on the new member of her family. I am sure that her cat will be treated like a member of the family, as cats are throughout the country. I could look at several cat welfare issues, including the public education campaign, cat breeding legislation, the control and regulation of airguns, which was raised earlier, and fireworks.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. As a cat lover, I am very lucky that Trizzie the cat came to me as a stray, and that, growing up, we had Tippy the cat, who came from the Cats Protection League. The Cats Protection League’s 2022 agenda encapsulates a lot of the issues that he has talked about, from microchipping to reducing violence against cats. It is really important that we get behind that campaign.

Rehman Chishti: I am so glad that I gave way, because the hon. Lady talked about Cats Protection, which I have met with and which has written to other Members and me. I was delighted to attend its Christmas parliamentary reception, along with other colleagues here. It does amazing work, and it is important that we work with it to ensure that we get the right kind of framework.

I was making the point that we could look at several cat welfare issues, but I will focus on two: the compulsory microchipping of all cats and reporting after an accident.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. When I got married some 32 years ago, my wife loved cats but I perhaps did not. However, as I continued to love my wife, I continued to love her cats as well. That is how life is. She is a volunteer and worker at the Assisi Animal Sanctuary, which does excellent work for cats and dogs. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that charities such as Assisi do a phenomenal job in caring for stray cats and in providing sterilisation and other deterrents that he referred to? No matter how good a job it does, we in the House must do ours, and to an equally high standard. Unfortunately, I believe that thus far we are not achieving that.

Rehman Chishti: I completely agree. The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has done some brilliant work, but we have an immense amount more to do. I also agree on the first point. The hon. Gentleman has an amazing wife, who made him a cat lover and animal lover. I am not married yet, but if I get married, I will need somebody who likes cats, so that we can get a cat. Coming in and out of London, I do not have time to have a cat; we are talking about animal welfare, and cats must be given time. That is key. His point about supporting and doing the right thing as parliamentarians—not simply talking about something but pushing for the right framework to be put in place—is absolutely right.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Does my hon. Friend acknowledge the role that cats play in the social fabric of our society, particularly for the elderly or vulnerable? They play a vital role in providing the comfort and companionship that those people are looking for.

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He will have seen the PDSA’s PAW report, which talked about cats’ five welfare needs, one of which is companionship. We talk about loneliness and the Government doing the right thing and people having the required environment to be happy, and what cats and animals do is absolutely amazing, so he makes a valid point.

My first point is about the compulsory microchipping of cats. I spoke to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on 25 October. He said that the proposals in my presentation Bill on the compulsory microchipping of cats and ensuring that car accidents involving cats are reported, as they are when dogs are involved, were very reasonable, and that he would ask his civil servants to look into the matter. I take the Secretary of State at his word, and if he says that the proposals are very reasonable, it therefore means that to do the opposite would be very unreasonable.

In the light of the Secretary of State’s commitment and his saying that the proposals are very reasonable, I ask the Minister: are cats less important than dogs? A statutory instrument requiring dogs to be compulsorily microchipped was introduced in 2015, so there does not need to be primary legislation; such a change could be done through a statutory instrument. At the time it was said that such a change would be done with dogs first to see how the process worked, and that extending it further would then be looked at. That was in 2015. I know that the Government and Parliament work slowly, but three years to see how a system works is long enough.

I know the Minister. He and I have been here for the same amount of time—eight years. He is a wonderful man who cares passionately about animal welfare and doing the right thing, and he listens to what people have to say. A petition on change.org, “Help me change the law for Cats involved in RTAs,” received 377,000 signatures. A parliamentary petition about microchipping had 33,413 signatures. A petition to introduce compulsory microchip scanning for vets, rescues and authorities had 70,800 signatures. That demonstrates that people out there want Parliament to do the right thing, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) says is our duty. Ministers can see the public interest in this area through the petitions put forward and the contributions of Members today and in previous debates.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): My hon. Friend mentioned microchip legislation. It is also true that the Road Traffic Act 1988 could be amended. Section 170 requires motorists to stop and report accidents involving animals, including horses, cattle, mules, sheep, pigs and dogs, but not cats. Does he agree that it is time to amend that legislation?

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend knows a lot about this because she chairs the all-party parliamentary group on cats and has done amazing work on this issue. She is absolutely right. We were told that legislation does not cover cats because they are free-roaming. I say to everyone, “Let’s get away from technicality. Let’s do the right thing and let’s look at what counterparts around the world do on this issue.”

I am grateful to Mandy at CatsMatter. She gave me a copy of a piece of legislation, which I have with me today. It is article 26 of the agriculture and markets law from the State of New York Department of Agriculture and Markets. Rather than using the RTA, we could...
have a specific section in animal welfare provision. Section 601 in that document is entitled "Leaving scene of injury to certain animals without reporting". It states:

"Any person operating a motor vehicle which shall strike and injure any horse, dog, cat or animal classified as cattle shall stop and endeavor to locate the owner or custodian of such animal".

If the free-roaming issue is the reason why we cannot amend the legislation here—the RTA—I point out that cats are also free roaming in the United States, but there the issue has been addressed through separate animal welfare legislation.

I was going to come later to the point made by my hon. Friend for Lewes (Maria Caulfield), but I shall come to it now. It is absolutely at the heart of this. If an individual is going along at night and knowingly hits a cat, is there a moral obligation on them? Many people would already act, but I make to the Minister the same point that I made earlier: are cats less important than dogs? We have legislation, but we argue over a same point that I made earlier: are cats less important than dogs?

That quote is from the points given to me by Animals Welfare's UK Adoption Centres were not microchipped. Unlike collars, microchips don't come off, or put cats at risk of collar-related injuries."

I say to the Minister that it would not be difficult to introduce the legislation that we are calling for. That could be done. Why is it so important? Cats Protection says:

"Failure to microchip a cat can result in the following problems:

- Difficulty reuniting a cat that goes missing with its owner
- Cats are needlessly rehomed because they are believed to be strays
- Worry about a pet cat in the event of an accident
- Vets are unable to contact cat owners in any case of emergency
- Ownership disputes are difficult to resolve
- Detection of cat theft may be difficult ."

Are those not good enough reasons to say that we have to act swiftly?

I have had representations from CatsMatter, Cats Protection, the PDSA and Blue Cross, which I will refer to shortly. If I send the Minister those representations, will he be kind enough to respond to all the points that they have made? In addition, will the Minister be kind enough to meet me and representatives of all the charities that I have mentioned, which have been supporting and making this case, along with my wonderful hon. Friend the Member for Lewes, who chairs the APPG?

I am looking at the time and will mention just two other points. First, the Blue Cross animal hospitals do amazing work. I am grateful to Blue Cross for allowing me to visit one of its centres and see its great work. On microchipping, it says that in 2017, 24% of cats admitted to Blue Cross were considered to be strays, but it is not uncommon for owners to present as strays because they are not microchipped or do not have updated details on their chip. I agree with those who say, "There's no point in microchipping if you don't ensure that the details are correct." That has to be addressed. The other point is, where will the money come from? Charities such as Blue Cross already do the work voluntarily. The cost is not significant; it can be done. Ways and avenues can be found, because it is the right thing to do. Blue Cross says that out of a total of 5,057 cats admitted to Blue Cross for rehoming in 2017, a staggering 80% were not microchipped. If the legislation were amended and compulsory microchipping rules brought into play, that would address a number of those points.

My second point, which my hon. Friend for Lewes has already brought to the fore, is about reporting after an accident. I say this to the Minister: if a jurisdiction in the United States addresses the issue of free roaming by covering it under animal welfare provisions, I think we should move away from amending the Road Traffic Act. That is why the presentation Bill that I put forward is called the Cats Bill. It does not talk specifically about the Road Traffic Act, because the matter can be addressed the other way round.

What I am calling for is the right thing to do. It ties in with what the Government are already trying to do. They have done a brilliant job on animal welfare, but a lot more needs to be done. I have seen the joy that cats bring. In October, for my 40th, I was in Little Rock, Arkansas, with my good friend French Hill. He is a Congressman down there and he has cats called JJ and...
Timber. I was not there long, but in the short time I was there, I became attached to them—I would see them when I came back after a day out. Cats are amazing creatures. They bring a lot of happiness, and I just think that if they bring us happiness, we have a moral obligation to support them—to make sure that they get the right support.

I therefore say to the Minister, who is a good man, from the bottom of my heart: can we please not just say today, “We will look to address this at some point in the future”? Short term, medium term, long term—what is the timescale now for getting this provision on to the statute book and putting it into practice?

4.18 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): In Suffolk, we have a very dedicated individual in Kathleen Lusted. She is now approaching 100 and has given almost her whole life to looking after and protecting cats that have gone missing and providing them with new homes. She has almost single-handedly set up a Cats Protection League branch in Framlingham and Saxmundham. Will the Minister join me in thanking her and congratulating her on her life’s work protecting and looking after cats in east Suffolk?

David Rutley: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating his constituent on her work in Framlingham and thanking her for it. If he will provide details, I will not only put my thanks to her on the record, but I will write to her, too, given that it has been her life’s work. I appreciate the contribution that my hon. Friend has made in putting that before us.

There are so many good causes and good welfare groups that take the cause further forward, whether that is Cats Protection, the RSPCA, Battersea Dogs and Cats Home or Blue Cross. They are absolutely committed to the welfare of cats and various other animals. Through their dedicated volunteers, they ensure that in many cases cats that have been lost can be reunited with their owners. They also rehome cats.

Before I get on to the substantive point of the debate, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) raised an important point about air weapons. I know his interest in these matters and I recognise, along with many others, the widespread concern about the shooting of cats with air weapons. Anyone who does that is liable to prosecution for causing unnecessary suffering to an animal. The maximum sentence is currently six months in prison, but that could be extended with new legislation that we are looking to put to the House in due course. A review of air weapons regulation was announced in October 2017. We are now considering what needs to happen with the licensing system and will announce the outcome shortly. That will help address some of his concerns.

Sir Greg Knight: I am most grateful to the Minister for that response. While he is reflecting on the matter, will he look at what has happened in Northern Ireland, which has a system of licensing for airguns? The number of cats reported in the press as being shot has dropped.

David Rutley: I must confess that I was not aware of that. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for raising what goes on in Northern Ireland, which I am sure he will look at. I will follow up with officials and see what we can learn.

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister give way?

David Rutley: On that point, yes, but then I had better move on to microchipping, otherwise I will be held to account.

Mr Reed: Last year, the RSPCA reported that it had reached a five-year high for the level of airgun attacks on pets. The vast majority of pets attacked were cats. Will the review that the Minister is engaged in also look at where airguns can be advertised and sold? We had an
incident in Norbury recently in which a pawnbroker’s shop turned itself into an airgun centre and had a big display of what looked like semi-automatic rifles, but were airguns, in the shop window on a high street right here in south London?

David Rutley: I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing that to our attention. I am not the Minister responsible for the matter, so I do not want to tread beyond where I should, but I have seen similar incidents and reports in my constituency. I will follow up on the very important point he raises and get back to him on how wide the review will go. I hope it will address such issues, but I will confirm that with him in due course.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham talked about his private Member’s Bill, which takes forward a serious issue. He also highlighted how the subject has been raised in numerous petitions. The sheer number of people who have signed the petitions highlights that the Members in the Chamber are not alone; many people are very concerned about the issue.

The Government recommend that any owner should microchip their cat to increase the chance of being reunited with it if it gets lost. In April this year, we updated the statutory cat welfare code with the welcome collaboration of Cats Protection and others. The code now more strongly emphasises the benefits of microchipping cats.

Microchipping technology has vastly improved the chances that lost pets will be reunited with their owners. For a relatively small, one-off cost of about £25, people can have greater confidence that their beloved cat can be identified. Why would someone not want to do that?

As the head of cattery at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, Lindsey Quinlan, has said, while the microchipping procedure is short and simple, “the return on their value is immeasurable”.

It is therefore good to see that the proportion of cats that are microchipped has grown in recent years.

My hon. Friend highlighted the good report by the PDSA showing that 68% of cats are microchipped. However, a recent survey by Cats Protection found that the majority of the cats taken to its adoption centres in the past 12 months were not microchipped. It is heartbreaking to think that some of those cats may not have been reunited with their families simply because of the lack of a microchip. That is why I strongly endorse Cats Protection’s campaign to promote cat microchipping.

The Government will work with Cats Protection and other animal welfare charities so that the proportion of cats that are microchipped continues to grow.

In England, compulsory microchipping of dogs was introduced through secondary legislation due to the public safety risk posed by stray dogs. That does not mean that cat welfare is any less important than dog welfare; it is just that there is not the same risk associated with cats from a safety perspective. For that reason, the microchipping of cats is not compulsory, but we strongly encourage owners and breeders to do it. That is why the Government’s cat welfare code promotes microchipping on two grounds. First, as I have already mentioned, microchipping gives cats the best chance of being identified when lost. Secondly and just as importantly, a lost cat that has a microchip is more likely to receive prompt veterinary treatment when needed. In that way, microchipping helps to protect more cats from pain, suffering, injury and disease, as required by the Animal Welfare Act 2006.

I am grateful to Cats Protection for its support in developing the cat welfare code. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs officials remain engaged with the issue. I commit to meeting Cats Protection in January, whether as part of the roundtable or separately, to take forward this important agenda.

In the limited time available, it is important to highlight some other actions I would like to take in response to this important debate. As has been said, under the Road Traffic Act 1988, drivers are required to stop and report accidents involving certain working animals, including cattle, horses and dogs. That does not currently extend to cats. However, the Highway Code advises drivers to report accidents involving any animal to the police. That should lead to many owners being notified when their cats are killed on roads. I am pleased that it is established good practice for local authorities to scan any dog or cat found on the streets so that the owner can be informed.

Following today’s debate, I will meet the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) to discuss how we can work together to further promote best practice. Highways England has clear guidelines for contractors to follow when they find a deceased dog. That process is designed with owners in mind, giving them the best chance of being informed of the incident that has occurred. The process laid out in the network management manual currently applies only to dogs. I would like to see what could be done to extend it to cats, and I hope other Members agree. The area is the responsibility of the Department for Transport. Following today’s debate, I will work with the Minister of State, Department for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman) to explore what the Government can do in this area.

To conclude, I would like to say how important it has been to have this debate today. It has brought to the issue very much to my attention as a relatively new Minister for Animal Welfare. I am extremely grateful for that. I would like to highlight how important animal welfare is to the Government and to DEFRA.

Rehman Chishti: The Minister has made a general point about looking to what further can be done. Rather than amending the 1988 Act, can we not put post-accident reporting for cats in animal welfare legislation, like in the United States? Will he go away and ensure we can look at compulsory microchipping, as well as the animal welfare perspective post-accident?

David Rutley: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. Of course I will go away and look at his points. He has made a compelling case. I, and the Government, feel some sympathy with what he says. There are practical differences between dogs and cats in terms of public safety, but notwithstanding that, there is more we want to do to promote these issues. I will gladly meet him and take forward the actions and meetings I have talked about already.

Question put and agreed to.
NHS: Staffing Levels

4.30 pm

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered staffing levels in the NHS.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It is a pleasure to lead this debate and I thank hon. Members for being present. I know that many are eager to contribute, and the fact that they have taken the time to be here, during one of Parliament’s more eventful weeks, emphasises the strength of feeling in the House about staffing levels in the NHS. I also thank the many organisations that have contacted me, offered support and shared their research.

It is clear that the issue of staffing in the NHS is a great and growing concern to many. Indeed, the case of my local NHS trust inspired me to apply for this debate. Most of my constituents rely on the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust for a range of acute hospital-based and community services. The trust serves not just the people of Batley and Spen, but more than half a million people across Wakefield and North Kirklees.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for securing this important debate. My constituents also use the Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust. There are still several hundred nursing vacancies there, and that is having a significant impact on the delivery of patient care. Does she agree that the chaos of the current Brexit situation is not helping to recruit nurses, potentially from the European Union?

Tracy Brabin: I shall go on to discuss that in more detail, but my hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely right. We have both been in meetings with the trust where that has proved to be of great concern to it.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): On a similar subject, is the hon. Lady aware that Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust has held open theatre days to promote particularly difficult roles to recruit for, such as operating department practitioners. Finally, it has increased the number of apprenticeship opportunities to offer different routes into careers in the NHS. It has held open theatre days to promote particularly difficult roles to recruit for, such as operating department practitioners. Finally, it has increased the number of apprenticeship opportunities to offer different routes into careers in the NHS.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As the daughter of a nurse, I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing nursing bursaries back?

Tracy Brabin: Certainly, funding and support should be given to frontline staffing. I will go on to talk about how I see that playing out.

The Mid Yorkshire trust is a major employer of about 8,000 members of staff who operate across three hospital sites: Pinderfields Hospital, Pontefract Hospital and Dewsbury and District Hospital, which is in my constituency. Like many trusts across the country, the trust is feeling the pressure on recruitment. In the most up-to-date figures, which were given to me directly by the trust this week, there is a 10% vacancy rate. That includes 95 full-time-equivalent posts for medical staff, 209 vacancies for full-time registered nurses, and vacancies for all other posts covered by the trust. The trust tells me that its key workforce challenge remains recruiting registered nurses and junior doctors in training. Those staff shortages lead to expensive cover being required—a bill that is ultimately paid by the taxpayer.

I am pleased that the trust has taken steps to mitigate against staffing shortages, including an extensive recruitment programme where vacancies across the trust are advertised and marketed widely. It has introduced a new associate nurse role in partnership with a local university, and expanded and increased the number of apprenticeship opportunities to offer different routes into careers in the NHS. It has held open theatre days to promote particularly difficult roles to recruit for, such as operating department practitioners. Finally, it has increased the number of nurses and doctors on the local temporary staff bank, which reduces its reliance on, and the cost of, commercial agency staff. I am sure that all hon. Members agree that that is all great.

Despite that work, problems remain. I must put on record my concern that staffing shortages can lead to problems for patients. The ambulatory emergency care unit at Dewsbury and District Hospital opened in 2015 to care for patients who needed a quick diagnosis and treatment, and who could be treated without the need for admission to a hospital bed. Since July, it has been closed because of staff shortages and it will remain closed for the foreseeable future. It had also been closed from the end of December last year to early March. Patients now face the lengthy and expensive trip to Pinderfields Hospital.

In the most recent inspection at Mid Yorks, the results of which were announced last week, the safety of services was deemed to require improvement, which will cause deep concern to my constituents. We are now told that the harsh funding climate for our NHS, which has existed since 2010, is coming to an end—austerity is over.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As the daughter of a nurse, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I know she is a proud member of the GMB, like me, so I declare an interest in highlighting its survey, which showed that 78% of NHS and ambulance workers are incredibly concerned about staffing levels. Does she agree with a nurse from Barnsley who said that we need more registered nurses and trained support staff, not untrained volunteers, who are sometimes being used?

Tracy Brabin: That is something that we have discussed with our trust. The cost should not necessarily fall on the shoulders of the people we want to employ, so that seems like a good thing.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): For Sherwood Forest Hospitals trust, which covers King’s Mill Hospital in my constituency, the latest figures show 200 nursing vacancies and, since nursing bursaries were abolished, a 32% decline in those applying to do it. Is it not time to bring nursing bursaries back?

Tracy Brabin: I absolutely agree that training for this most lauded position should not be done at the cost of nurses themselves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Lady agree that we must have fewer medical quangos and more medical professionals in their white doctors’ coats seeing patients; less cleaning up of paper trails and more cleaning up in wards and A&Es; and funding that is targeted at frontline staffing and reasonable rates of pay?

Tracy Brabin: That is targeted at frontline staffing and reasonable rates of pay.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As the daughter of a nurse, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I know she is a proud member of the GMB, like me, so I declare an interest in highlighting its survey, which showed that 78% of NHS and ambulance workers are incredibly concerned about staffing levels. Does she agree with a nurse from Barnsley who said that we need more registered nurses and trained support staff, not untrained volunteers, who are sometimes being used?
Tracy Brabin: My sister is also a nurse. When someone has a nurse in the family, they understand how hard they work. My hon. Friend must be psychic, because I am about to go on to that point.

When it comes to the recruitment and retention of NHS staff, it could not be further from the truth that austerity is over. The Royal College of Nursing did not mince its words when it said:

“The UK is experiencing a nursing workforce crisis”, particularly in England. With one in three nurses due to retire within a decade, we are looking at a perfect storm of increasing vacancies across health and care.

Paula Sherriff: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that, as a direct result of staffing shortages at Dewsbury and District Hospital, the midwife-led birthing unit has had to be closed several times? September was a particularly bad month for closures. That has a traumatic effect on mums-to-be, who expect to give birth there but turn up and get sent elsewhere.

Tracy Brabin: Capacity, particularly in midwifery, is a massive issue, and midwife recruitment is also a problem. A mum who is about to have a baby wants to make sure that they are guaranteed a bed and a midwife who will be with them throughout the process, so of course that is a concern. There are almost 41,000 vacant nursing posts in the NHS and it is estimated that that number will grow to almost 48,000 by 2023—just five short years away.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Lady is being generous. Does she agree that the problem with the recruitment and retention of staff also stretches to our mental health services? In Cumbria, three years ago, the Government promised a specialist one-to-one eating disorder service for young people, which has yet to be delivered. Does she agree that it is not good enough for the Government to make promises that they cannot deliver because they cannot recruit the staff?

Tracy Brabin: We are seeing increasing problems around recruitment and retention in mental health services, which I will go on to. We know that nurses are heroes of our health service and that they will always voice their concerns.

A survey conducted by the RCN in 2017 had some deeply worrying results. More than half of the nurses said that care was compromised on the last shift and that many EEA doctors continue to feel unwelcome and uncertain about their future here. Given the uncertainty that we have seen in the past few days, I imagine that that feeling will not change any time soon. The results could be devastating, with more than a third of doctors from the EU considering moving away from our country. That is the last thing we need, as hospitals are already chronically understaffed, with more than one in four respondents to a BMA survey reporting that rota gaps are so serious and frequent that they cause significant problems for patient safety.

Alarmingly, some doctors feel bullied into taking on extra work. It is clear that something needs to change, particularly now we are in winter again. There are too few staff, who are too stretched, and trusts across the country are struggling to fill vacancies. However, in order to fix a problem, we need to know whose remit it is to provide a solution. Shockingly, there are no specific legal duties or responsibilities at UK Government level to ensure that health and social care providers have enough staff to provide safe and effective care to meet the needs of the population. Health Education England has some powers related to the higher education supply. In practice, however, those powers relate only to the funding for the 50% of their courses that nursing students spend on placements. Health Education England no longer commissions higher education university places, meaning that it is responsive to students signing up for nursing courses rather than proactively seeking them based on areas of need and workforce planning.

We know that the number of European workers in the NHS has fallen dramatically since the referendum. Mid Yorks recruited highly skilled workers from the Philippines, but delays to visa applications meant that 50% of them have now gone elsewhere and into other jobs. We need to do better than that.

The case is clear to me and to many others that we need a proactive and accountable power-holding body that makes robust assessments of population need, and uses that need to calculate the workforce requirements. No action has been taken to assess the level of population need for health and social care support now or in the future. Nobody has calculated how many nurses are needed to meet those needs safely and effectively. No
workforce strategy is in place to set up the mechanism through which new registered nurses can be generated through a supply line.

Workforce plans are not consistently available and when they are are based on affordability and finance, rather than on the expertise and skills mix of staff required to care for patients. Plans are limited in their ability to make effective change. Providers may identify a need for more nursing posts but then find themselves unable to fill them. Vacant posts stay vacant and gaps on the frontline are filled by more expensive bank and agency staff, and—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock)—by volunteers, or substituted lower-qualified staff. Patient care is left undone, with lengthening waiting lists.

That is the sad truth of where we are and when the Minister responds I would be grateful to know what plans are in place to enforce accountability for the NHS workforce. Simon Stevens has confirmed that the long-term plan for the NHS could not definitely deal with the NHS workforce and there are serious concerns that without investment a new plan will ultimately fail.

Six years on from the Health and Social Care Act 2012, it is still unclear which organisation is accountable for workforce strategy. Too often, no one is taking responsibility. Health Education England has been consulted, but it has failed to deliver a workforce strategy. Now is the time for leadership and action, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. The debate can last until 5.30 pm. I have to call the Front Benchers no later than 5.7 pm. Four Members are seeking to catch my eye. The guideline limits for the Front Benchers’ speeches are five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister, and then Tracy Brabin will have two or three minutes at the end of the debate to sum it up. There are 20 minutes of Back-Bench time before I call the Front Benchers, so there will have to be a five-minute time limit on Back Benchers’ contributions.

4.47 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this debate and on highlighting the biggest challenge facing the NHS: the creeping workforce crisis that has been evolving for some time now. We are now seeing that crisis beginning, in real terms, to affect patient care.

The hon. Lady was right to highlight the fact that a lack of staff in some parts of the country means that operations are being cancelled and beds are being closed. She was also right to point out the challenges that Brexit poses to the recruitment and retention of frontline NHS staff; in the past decade, we have been increasingly reliant on European Union staff coming to work in the NHS. I am sure that all of us would like to put on the record our support for the excellent work that NHS staff from the UK and from all over the world do in caring for patients.

I will also do what I should have done at the beginning of my speech and draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, as I am a practising NHS hospital doctor working in mental health services.

Paula Sherriff: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Dr Poulter: I will not, because of the time limit and because I want to let other people speak; I am sure that we can talk about this issue in detail after the debate.

Very briefly, Mr Hollobone, the Government have made a number of promises about NHS staffing and yet, unfortunately, those promises are failing to come to fruition. In 2015, there was a promise of 5,000 more GPs. Recently, I submitted a written parliamentary question about how much progress had been made in realising that target but I did not get an adequate answer. I would be grateful if the Minister updated us in his concluding remarks by saying how close we are to realising that target of 5,000 additional full-time GPs.

I would also like to highlight some of the challenges in community and mental health services. Very often in this Chamber, we talk about hospitals, and very often the NHS is seen through the prism of that acute sector, but the key challenge to keeping people out of hospital is doing more in the community, building up community mental and physical health services—and they are the very services that are seeing reductions in frontline staff.

I want to touch briefly on mental health. We know that the number of full-time-equivalent mental health nurses fell by 6,000 between 2010 and March 2018, including a reduction of more than 1,800 in learning disability nurses alone. The number of child and adolescent mental health service and learning disability consultant psychiatrists has also slightly declined over the past decade, and many parts of the country, particularly outside London, are struggling to fill higher registrar training posts in those services.

Perhaps more concerning is that the number of junior doctors in specialist psychiatry training—core and higher psychiatric trainees who will become the consultant psychiatrists of tomorrow—has also fallen, by 490 full-time equivalent doctors, from 3,187 in 2009 to 2,697 in March 2018. [Interruption.] The civil servants are rapidly checking my figures; they are from answers to parliamentary questions, so they are absolutely correct.

That is a woeful record of decline in the psychiatric and mental health workforce, and it must be corrected. If the Government are serious about their rhetoric on mental health, about improving the quality of provision for people with poor mental health, they need to recognise that the workforce has already declined. Even if there is the promised increase in numbers, it will be from a lower baseline than that of about a decade ago.

The only way to deliver the expansion in services that patients deserve—for example, specialist eating disorder services in Cumbria or East Anglia—is by having a much more serious approach to the recruitment and retention of mental health staff and by paying premiums to attract both doctors to work in CAMHS and people to work in parts of the country where there is a shortage of mental health staff. I look forward to the Minister’s response.
4.52 pm  Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on calling this vital debate.

I remember the challenging years of the mid-1990s, when I was working as a physio in the NHS. During that crisis time, I never knew when I would get home. Today’s scenario reminds me of the dying years of a Tory Government—the parallels are so strong.

In York, I read the Care Quality Commission reports in detail, and although the care given by our NHS staff is excellent, the real challenge that I pull out of the results of CQC reports is the staffing crisis. My local hospital currently has 59 doctor vacancies, and there are 580 nursing vacancies in bands 4 to 7, 312 of which are in bands 5 to 7. The trust has done everything it can to recruit. It went to Spain and recruited 40 Spanish nurses, 37 of whom left after a very short period. The reality is that NHS staffing is in crisis and that affects patient care.

Last year, the trust had to spend £8.5 million on agency staff. That pushed a trust that is already struggling because the funding formula does not work for York into further deficit, which has an impact on its control and on the resources it can get for the winter crisis—York had some of the highest levels of influenza last year. The Minister, therefore, must ensure that the money works, as well as addressing staffing.

I want briefly to look at primary care because, as we have heard, we need early intervention across all ages to keep people out of hospital. Rightly, the Government looked to increase the number of health visitors, and by 2015 the figure was up to 10,309, but since then we have seen a 23.8% fall, down to 7,852, meaning that young people are not getting the input they need. School nursing figures have also fallen by 25% since 2010.

We have a real crisis in our primary care workforce, and also in mental health, as the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) said. Certainly we feel that in York, whether in the community or the hospital environment.

Paula Sherriff: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachael Maskell: I am going to continue.

The trust is doing everything it can to recruit, but it is impossible to recruit because the national pool of mental health staff is far too small. Therefore, it is vital that we educate healthcare professionals across the board. I remember discussions at a national level with the trade unions on that very issue, about needing to find a different way. In some countries they bring a real foundation into NHS training so that everyone works together in the first 18 months or two years of their training and has a breadth of understanding of medicine before going off to specialise. We, instead, train in traditional old silos of jobs that have clearly blended over the years, and we must look once again at how we structure that.

Thirdly, we need to look at the “Agenda for Change” package. There is no doubt that it is hard to recruit because people are poorly paid in the NHS and can be better paid elsewhere. Given the stress levels and the antisocial hours that people work, we need to look once again at the remuneration of our NHS workforce. Finally, the knowledge and skills framework has consistently been underutilised by the Government and NHS employers, and it is vital that we go back to that framework of professional development in the NHS.

4.57 pm  Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I declare my interest as a nurse who is still on the Nursing and Midwifery Council, or NMC, register. I speak, therefore, with first-hand experience about having to deal with staffing shortages during more than 20 years of working in the NHS. Staffing problems have always been there, but I welcome the debate that the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) has secured because we must recognise the issues that many hospital trusts and community services are experiencing.

I welcome last month’s NMC figures, which show an increase of more than 4,000 nurses joining the register in the past 12 months, a significant percentage of whom were UK-trained nurses. There was also an increase of 3,000 UK nurses compared with this time last year. I welcome those figures, but that is not to say that there is not a staffing problem across the NHS.

I want to focus on some of the solutions from my experience that would make a real difference out there in the workforce. I understand the sentiments of the hon. Members for Batley and Spen and for York Central (Rachael Maskell) about the bursary scheme, but I trained on that scheme myself and it is far from the panacea that has been portrayed in recent years. We were paid a pitance—£400 a month—for the three years of our training. Yes, it paid for travel and expenses, but not for much else.

Someone training as a nurse has to do the minimum hours to get on to the register, so it is very difficult for them to have an additional job, as other students would. Often times they are mature students and have other commitments, such as children and family responsibilities, and an additional part-time job is almost impossible to hold down. Life on a bursary was tough, and it often explained the high drop-out rate during the three years.

The system I would prefer, and have always advocated, is the degree apprenticeship route. During my time in this place, I have been doing bank shifts at my old hospital with student nurses who are now on the degree apprenticeship route: it is a far better system, and we need to upscale it as a matter of course. Not only are student nurses earning while they are learning; they are part of the workforce, which is a point that the bursary scheme missed completely. Student nurses were university students, but not necessarily part of the
working environment, and often found it tough to move into that environment, because they were not seen as key members of the workforce.

The degree apprenticeship route also means that when students work for hospitals or community trusts during their degree apprenticeship, they are often being paid by those trusts, which are then able to accurately predict the number of students coming through the system. That was different under the bursary system: trusts just had to wait and see which newly qualified nurses applied for their vacant posts. For long-term workforce planning, having those student nurses as part of the team means that trusts have an idea of who is likely to come forward when they qualify. There are a number of positives, and I push for the Government to roll out that degree apprenticeship system—maybe not just in nursing, but in other healthcare professional specialities.

I will briefly touch on flexible working. We are under the misapprehension that internal rotation and a shift-based system means there is flexible working for staff in the NHS, which there absolutely is not. In most areas, people are forced to do internal rotation, whether in the community or in the hospital-based system, and that is increasing as we move towards a seven-day-a-week service. If young parents with children are all of a sudden put on a week of nights with a week's notice, and have no childcare provision, that makes it almost impossible for them to hold down their job.

In the good old days when I first started, people were able to do a permanent nights system, to do permanent weekends, or to choose to work evening shifts. That is all gone now: they are forced to do internal rotation. I say to the Minister that the NHS needs to look at a flexible working system for its staff, because if it does, it is more likely to hold on to the excellent staff who keep the NHS going.

5.1 pm

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on having secured this important debate. I have a little bit of a family connection to the NHS, as I am the daughter of a GP, but it is an honour to follow colleagues of all parties who have direct experience of working in the NHS. I welcome their having shared that experience with us.

Staffing levels in the NHS are an important issue, which affects my local NHS trust in Worcestershire as well. I am in close contact with that trust and with staff at the Alexandra hospital in Redditch, and I very much hear that concern; I hear it from my constituents all the time. I agree that it is essential that we increase the NHS workforce at all levels, from nurses to consultants and, particularly, GPs. We are now in a situation in which demand is rising fast: the population is growing, it is ageing, and people are living longer. That is partly due to the success of our fantastic NHS, and the doctors and nurses who work within it, but it does create one of the biggest problems that the NHS faces.

I must have met every Minister in the Department of Health and Social Care over the past few months, and I am looking forward to meeting the Secretary of State later today, when I will be pressing for more details about a welcome capital investment in breast cancer services at the Alexandra hospital and across Worcestershire. There has also been more investment in my local hospital, to keep the frailty unit open and open a new urgent care centre. However, all those services have to be staffed, and we need the stability and security of knowing they will continue to be there, serving my constituents. I welcome those changes, but in previous meetings, I have consistently pressed the issue of staffing levels. I am encouraged that the Government are focused on meeting these challenges and providing the NHS with the workforce we need it to have.

At the moment, one of the biggest recruitment drives in the NHS’s history is taking place. It is intended to increase the number of doctors and nurses trained in the NHS by 25%—an increase of 1,500 places a year. Steps such as those will play a crucial role in supporting the future NHS workforce, but as Members have highlighted, the immediate pressures are still here and must be addressed now. Nowhere is this issue more acute than in general practice, and I often write to constituents who have complained about the waiting times for seeing their GP. Since becoming the MP for Redditch in 2017, I have pushed for change; I am pleased that the Government are listening and now intend to hire 5,000 more GPs and 5,000 additional GP staff by 2020.

I also welcome the fact that the Home Office has exempted doctors and nurses from the tier 2 visa quota system for non-EEA skilled migrant workers. That will enable the NHS to recruit more quickly and widely, especially considering that NHS recruitment demands account for 40% of tier 2 places. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care have said time and again that we must get the message out that we want EU nationals to stay in this country, and we need them in our NHS. That has been unilaterally guaranteed by this country, with or without a deal, so please let us get that message out to our wonderful NHS staff.

There are positive steps, and the progress that has already been made should be welcomed. In my county of Worcestershire, the total number of staff employed rose by almost 7% between August 2013 and August this year, and the number of doctors has increased by 5% . The number of nurses has gone up by nearly 8%. There are now nearly 1,400 nurses working in Worcestershire acute hospitals. I have been to the wards, and spoken to the nurses at the Alex who tell me about the positive recruitment days that they have held at the University of Worcestershire. I very much welcome that work, and I hope that it will continue to bear fruit.

It is vital to maintain the morale of our staff, and I welcome what my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) said regarding flexible working. It is
important that we look at the issues in the round. As a former employer myself, I know how important it is to get every aspect of the employment offer right. I welcome the new contract deals that will result in a 6.5% pay rise for more than 1 million NHS workers this year. That means that those on the lowest salaries in the NHS will see some of the largest proportionate pay rises. Many nurses and healthcare assistants will enjoy pay increases of at least 25%. We must get the pay offer right to ensure that we encourage our NHS staff both to enter the profession and to stay.

I thank the Minister for attending the debate. I want to hear more about the strategy. I welcome the progress that has been made, and I implore him to continue, steadfast, in that pursuit.

5.21 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP):

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I, too, declare an interest as a longstanding NHS worker of more than 30 years.

Healthcare is not delivered by machines or buildings; it is delivered by people. People are the core of the NHS. The problem relates to workforce, and it is hitting all four nations. Although Scotland has the highest ratio of every group of healthcare staff per head of population, we too face challenges. We have a 4.8% nurse vacancy rate in Scotland, but in England it is more than 11.5%. The Royal College of Nursing says that there are 41,000 nurse vacancies at the moment, and if action is not taken, that will rise to 48,000.

As other Members mentioned, since the introduction of the bursary in 2015, there has been a one third drop in applications. Acceptances in England have gone down by almost 4%, whereas in Scotland they have gone up by almost 14.5% over the same period. The bursary is having a huge impact, particularly on mature students, who might already have a degree and have therefore also been hit by the removal of the post graduate bursary that allows a nurse to be trained in just two years.

There has been a 15% drop in mature students, which is hitting those with mental health issues and learning disabilities in particular, as those specialities tend to attract the more mature nurse student. There has been a 13% drop in mental health nursing staff and a 40% drop in nurses looking after those with learning disabilities. That makes those services unsustainable.

Brexit is affecting the workforce, as it is every other aspect of life. There has been a 90% drop in European nurses registering to come and work in the UK, and a trebling of EU nurses who are leaving the UK register. That does not help to solve the problem, and those nurses cannot be totally replaced by UK staff in enough time. It does not matter that the Government comes out with warm words if the Home Office’s actions make the nurses feel insecure. Friends of ours who have been GPs for more than 20 years in Scotland applied for citizenship for their children. The eldest and youngest children were granted it; the middle child was refused. What are they now talking about? “Maybe we should go back to Germany where we’d be safe.”

From every angle, the Government are taking actions that are making staffing levels worse. The former Secretary of State for Health, the right hon. Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), used to go on about the lack of junior doctors and consultants as a cause of excess deaths among those admitted at weekends. Actually, the only staffing impact proven through research is on the ratio of registered nurses to patients—not healthcare assistants or others.

Dr Poulter: I am sure that most of us had great concerns about the previous Secretary of State’s use of statistics, but a mental health study was carried out and the highest morbidity rates were in the middle of the week, not at weekends, which rather disproved the assertions that he was making.

Dr Whitford: We pointed out repeatedly at the time. It has been shown time and again that quality, well-trained, experienced nurses—not so much agency nurses or healthcare assistants—who know a ward are the bedrock of every single service in healthcare.

Brexit is having an impact. Even though in Scotland our Government have promised to pay settled status fees for all those working in public services, we have already lost, according to the British Medical Association survey, 14% of our doctors. England has lost almost 20%. We cannot reach a point where England has 50,000 nurse vacancies. That would be unsafe. The Government need to take action and, like the Scottish Government, put the bursary back, get rid of tuition fees, and make it sustainable for people to train to become nurses. If they do not do that, the sustainability and safety of the NHS in England will deteriorate further.

5.26 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) on securing this extremely important debate, and on the tour de force that she presented. She touched on many important issues. Time restrains me, so I will not be able to pick up on all the points that she made, nor on all the impressive contributions made by other Members, particularly those who have had frontline experience, and had practical examples that we need to look into further.

My hon. Friend talked about her local trust being a big employer in her constituency and beyond. Indeed, it employs some 8,000 people, but has a 10% vacancy rate—sadly, very much in line with the national average. She was right that covering the gaps in the rota is an expensive business. I was pleased to hear that so many initiatives were being undertaken by the trust, but the fact that there is still a 10% vacancy rate shows that something is broken with the system.

My hon. Friend highlighted the impact on patients that staff shortages can have regarding closures, and she was right to highlight the nursing workforce crisis and the whole range of specialisms that are at risk. She was also right to raise the uncertainty that Brexit brings to staff, and to highlight the lack of legal powers to require safe staffing levels, and the overall strategy that we need to get the correct staffing levels.
I was also delighted, as always, to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). She was right that agency spend sucks away vital resources and that recruitment challenges will never be solved unless we get the right framework. That is why we deeply regret the abolition of the nurse bursary, to which I will return.

We know that the NHS workforce is extraordinary. The NHS is one of the biggest employers in the world, and we must pay tribute, as we do every time, to the staff who work so tirelessly, day in and day out. We also have to recognise that there are simply not enough of them. Last month, the King’s Fund, the Nuffield Trust and the Health Foundation joined forces and warned that the staffing crisis in the NHS is deepening so fast that the service could be short of up to 350,000 staff by 2030. That warning is stark. Clearly there is an existential threat to the NHS if action is not taken to address the staffing crisis that we are now being told about.

According to official figures, there were more than 102,000 vacancies across the NHS at the end of September. That means that one in 11 posts in the NHS is currently vacant. The chair of NHS Improvement, Baroness Harding, recently acknowledged that “the single biggest problem in the NHS at the moment is that we don’t have enough people wanting to work in it.”

However, the issues that we face run far deeper than merely how attractive the profession looks to applicants.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen said, we face a perfect storm of a retention crisis caused by factors including pay and conditions, ongoing uncertainty about Brexit, demographic challenges in many sectors of the workforce and the ongoing impact of the catastrophic decision to scrap bursaries for nurses, midwives and allied health professionals. Although many of those issues are clear and long-standing, there is no credible overarching strategy to address any of them. As the House of Lords Select Committee on the Long-term Sustainability of the NHS found, the lack of such a strategy “represents the biggest internal threat to the sustainability of the NHS.”

We all eagerly await the publication of the NHS long-term plan, but I would welcome the Minister’s confirmation of precisely when that will happen. I was deeply concerned to hear Simon Stevens’s comments about how the plan will not definitively address staffing problems. Will the Minister confirm whether that is the case? If so, when will we see the comprehensive strategy for the NHS workforce that we so desperately need?

As many hon. Members have said, the workforce crisis has been compounded by the abolition of undergraduate nurse bursaries. When it was announced that bursaries would be abolished, we were told that our many concerns were misguided and that the changes would lead to an additional 10,000 training places being provided. However, just as everyone but the Government predicted, the exact opposite has happened. As of September 2018, almost 1,800 fewer people are due to start university nursing courses in England, while the number of mature students has plummeted by 15%.

In our debate on nursing higher education on 21 November, the Minister said:

“We expect NHS England to clearly set out its commitment to the nursing workforce in the long-term plan, and ensure that there is a clear way for that plan to be implemented... The Government will be consulting on the detailed proposals on future funding for higher education that the RCN has put forward.”—[Official Report, 21 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 372WH]

Will he provide greater detail on that point and say when that consultation will take place?

The issues that hon. Members have discussed today are acute, systemic and entrenched, but they have been exacerbated by the Government’s short-term and flawed approach. Any long-term strategy for the NHS will fail if it does not address them. Staff and patients deserve more than a health service in a constant state of crisis. They deserve better than this Government.

5.31 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank the hon. Member for Batley and Spen (Tracy Brabin) for securing this debate. As she and hon. Members who have contributed to other such debates will know, the issues she raises are very similar to those that we discussed on 21 November in the debate that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) has just referred to. However, it is welcome to have the opportunity to discuss them again, because such debates reflect the importance that we all place on the NHS workforce. The one thing that the hon. Gentleman and I agree on is that it is right to begin by reiterating our thanks to the NHS professional staff for their work treating patients day in, day out.

I also thank other hon. Members for their contributions. I note in particular the comment rightly made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (Maria Caulfield) that we need to upscale nurse degree apprenticeship routes. I will speak about that in more detail if I have time. My hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean) spoke about the capital announcement made last week, which I was pleased to see come through. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) made some points about mental health—may I offer him a meeting at the Department to discuss those matters directly, because today I want to concentrate on other matters? The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) made a contribution based on her valuable experience.

I should say right at the outset, as I did in our debate two weeks ago, that the Government greatly value the staff who contribute to and support the NHS. We understand its importance and are committed to ensuring that it is supported and funded appropriately, which is clearly reflected in the extra £20.5 billion a year that the NHS will get by 2023-24.

As the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston quoted me saying in our last debate, we expect NHS England to set out clearly its commitment to the workforce in the long-term plan. The plan will address how to open up the profession to more people from all backgrounds and ensure that they get the right support throughout their training. To answer his question: yes, when the long-term plan is published, he will see the workforce embedded in it and in our strategy. We also expect NHS England to deliver a clear implementation plan to guarantee the future of the workforce. The NHS employs a record number of staff—more than 1.2 million in 2018, which is more than at any other time in its 70-year history—with significant growth in newly qualified staff since 2010.
Let me repeat what I said two weeks ago: “the Government, and I as the new Minister for Health, should never be complacent.”—[Official Report, 21 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 372WH.]

We are not. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that nursing remains an attractive career so that the NHS can build on the record numbers of nurses on our wards. Actions already taken to boost the supply of nurses range from training more nurses and offering new routes into the profession to enhancing rewards and pay packages, and there are now 11,000 more nurses on our wards than in May 2010.

NHS England, NHS Improvement and Health Education England are working with trusts on a range of recruitment, retention and return to practice programmes to ensure that the required workforce is in place to deliver safe and effective services. We should note that NHS Improvement has had some real success with its retention programme. Retention seems to me one of the key issues for the Government to focus on, and that will be reflected in the long-term plan. NHS Improvement’s programme continues its direct work with trusts to support improvements in retention, with a focus on the nursing workforce and the mental health clinical workforce. So far, 35 trusts have been involved and the initial evidence is positive and encouraging, with more flexible working programmes and greater support for older workers. It is therefore right that that programme be expanded further to all remaining NHS trusts in England.

Maria Caulfield: Revalidation is a new system for nurses to retain their registration, but it is a very difficult and stressful process for nurses who may be part-time or part of a hospital bank. I was lucky because my NHS trust, the Royal Marsden, is extremely supportive to its bank workers, but will the Minister ensure that bank nurses are supported through the revalidation process to keep them registered?

Stephen Hammond: I am listening carefully to my hon. Friend, and I will ensure that that work is undertaken.

As I have said today and on previous occasions, the priority is to get more nurses on our wards. There are currently 52,000 nurses in training, and we have announced a policy change that will result in additional clinical placement funding to make 5,000 more training places available each year. My hon. Friend made the point that nursing bursaries were not always the panacea that everyone suggests; students on the loans system are at least 25% better off than under the previous system. However, we recognise that students incur additional costs as a result of attending clinical placements, so we have introduced a learning support fund with a child dependants allowance, reimbursement of travel costs and an exceptional hardship fund. When I spoke to nurses at Barts last week, I listened carefully to the points they made about the need for help with travel in particular, and I am looking carefully at that issue.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen raised the RCN proposal. Yesterday, as I had promised I would, I responded to the RCN in a formal letter to Dame Donna, and I look forward to meeting her to discuss her proposals in the near future—hopefully the very near future.

We are increasing the number of midwifery training places by more than 3,000 over the next four years. There continues to be strong demand for nursing places, with more applicants than places, but I am under no illusions, nor am I complacent. We need more people applying and we need to increase that route. A number of routes are open. HEE’s programme covers all fields of nursing; its RePAIR—reducing pre-registration attrition and improving retention—programme explores effective interventions to ensure that people are supported through their whole student journey from pre-enrolment to post-qualification.

The hon. Member for Batley and Spen was right to mention the number of new routes into nursing. In particular, she will have noted the report published last week by the Select Committee on Education on the nurse degree apprenticeship. We are working with the Department for Education to carefully consider the Committee’s recommendations and I will respond in due course.

I want to turn to the story of doctors. In the NHS today, it is true that there are 18,200 more doctors in trusts and CCGs than there were in 2010. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich raised the matter of the additional 5,000 doctors. This year, we have recruited 3,473 GP trainees, against the target of 3,250. That is an increase on last year, but we are determined to meet the commitment of 5,000. To ensure that that is possible, we have rolled out an extra 1,500 medical school places. By 2020, as he knows, five new medical schools will be open to deliver that expansion.

In the whole of this discussion, it is only right that I recognise that the Government value the professionals. It is key that we ensure that NHS staff are well remunerated. It is absolutely right that we have given NHS staff a well-deserved pay rise. All staff will receive a 3% pay rise by the end of 2018-19.

There is a lot more I might have said. The hon. Member for Batley and Spen raised a number of local issues, including ambulatory care. If she cares to write to me or to catch me, I would be happy to have a longer discussion with her. I thank her and all hon. Members for the points they have made in the debate. I also stress, as I have done today to staff at North Middlesex, and last week, that making sure that we have an NHS long-term plan that sets out a strategy for the NHS and ensures a sustainable supply of clinical workforce—doctors, workers and others—is key, and it is key to delivering our ambitions for the NHS. I thank the staff for all that they do.

5.41 pm

Tracy Brabin: I thank colleagues from both sides of the House for their contributions, particularly those with frontline experience, and I thank the Minister for his measured response.

I have a couple of points. First, I am sure the Minister can feel the sense of urgency in this debate. Although I appreciate that long-term discussions are needed, we still do not have a date for when the long-term plan will be published or for the consultation on the Royal College of Nursing proposals. The Minister said it would be soon, but when will we have that?

Stephen Hammond: There is a commitment from the Government to produce the long-term plan before the end of the year, as the hon. Lady knows, and I have written to Dame Donna to request a meeting to discuss the RCN’s proposals.
Tracy Brabin: That is very reassuring. We hear from across the House that mental health is receiving such little support. People are hanging by a thread. Nurses are saying to their organisations and their MPs, “I am worried for the health and safety of my patients. I’m doing too many shifts. I’m absolutely shattered. I can’t guarantee that I am going to be doing my job properly. They’re bringing in volunteers to support me on the ward.” It is an absolute crisis. While I understand that the wheels of government work very slowly, I hope that the Minister takes from this debate that Brexit has been a universal issue. We are losing staff members. I welcome the commitment to an extra 5,000 doctors and so on, but that is just plugging the gap of the staff who are draining away from our hospitals and frontline services.

Stephen Hammond: I absolutely recognise that Brexit is a pressure on the system, but we should also recognise that there are 4,367 more professionals working in the NHS from the EU than there were at the date of the referendum. It is important to put that on the record.

Dr Whitford: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Hammond: I would give way, but I cannot—

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Order. I call Tracy Brabin.

Tracy Brabin: If that is the case, the statistics are welcome, but in my constituency we are losing European members of staff. We cannot get away from the overall numbers—there are staffing shortages of 10%. In my constituency and in my trust they cannot recruit, because of various issues. I am grateful that the Government listened when I raised the question of tier 2 visas with the Prime Minister, when we wanted to bring over a paediatrician but could not because the visa took so long that he got another job. I welcome that when it comes to nurses, too, but we have to accept that there are things such as the bursary—

5.45 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 12 December 2018

[SIR HENRY BELLINGHAM in the Chair]

UK Fishing Industry

9.30 am

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK fishing industry.

That this House has considered the UK fishing industry.

I felt it was important to hold this debate in the run-up to the last Fisheries Council that the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), will attend and have a voice in. We have heard lots of debates in this place about what will happen to fisheries policy once we leave the European Union in March 2019. As is normal, we should have a debate about what the Fisheries Council will decide this year.

Before I move on to the Fisheries Council, I would like to set the record straight. We have heard many people in recent times quote the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation, implying that it welcomes the deal that is on the table. I want to quote the federation’s chief executive, Bertie Armstrong:

“We have made it very clear since the referendum in 2016 that anything other than full, unfettered sovereignty over our own waters would be crossing a red line for the fishing industry.

Despite the stated wishes of French president Emmanuel Macron, which we know are shared by the other large fishing nations, Denmark, the Netherlands and Germany, we should give a clear and resounding ‘Non!’ to the idea of guaranteeing continued access.

Access and quotas must be negotiated...not carved up in advance.”

I do not think those words describe some of the things we have heard attributed to Bertie Armstrong in the main Chamber in recent times, and I wanted to set the record straight.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on obtaining this debate. Does she accept that Bertie Armstrong and the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation do not speak for the whole of the Scottish fishing fleet and the Scottish fishing industry? The industry is multifaceted, particularly in my constituency on the west coast of Scotland, where fishermen entirely depend on getting unfettered access to their live catch and getting that on to European tables.

Mrs Murray: I completely agree with and respect the hon. Gentleman’s point. However, the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation has specifically been used by various people in the main Chamber as a way of backing up their point, and has thus been misquoted. I felt it was right to put on record that what has been attributed to it in the past was not the full story.

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. We both talk a lot to Bertie Armstrong—I spoke to him on Monday. In the quote she repeated, she is absolutely correct about what Bertie Armstrong and other members of the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation have said: nobody is taking anything for granted, and we must continue to fight our case in future negotiations. Bertie Armstrong and others have come out in support of the withdrawal agreement, but only in as much as it gets us to that next phase. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Mrs Murray: I do not accept that. Having spoken to him myself, I know he has not said that he respects the withdrawal agreement completely. That is why I wanted to put on record that what we are hearing in the main Chamber is not the whole statement.

I do not want to focus on subjects that we can discuss in other debates, so I want to address the Council of Ministers, which is due to meet later next week—the Minister might correct me on that. We need to realise that this is a very significant Council of Ministers meeting, because it is the last time our Fisheries Minister will actually have a voice at the table. Even if there is an implementation period, although he will attend future meetings, he will not have a voice. It is extremely important that we all realise that.

Secondly, from 1 January next year, the landing obligation comes into force. There are conflicting regulations as far as that is concerned, because it opens up the whole question of choke species. In recent weeks, bass, which is not really subject to quota, but is subject to a bycatch limit, has affected the small boats in south-east Cornwall, many of which fish from the constituency of my friend, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard). Because of EU regulations, these fishermen have to discard bass—a very high value fish—at sea, where it does not survive. That goes completely against the grain of sustainability and conservation. Once we take back control of our waters, the Minister will have the flexibility to make changes to UK legislation so that the rules fit what fishermen are actually catching.
Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for making that really important point. In Brixham, in my constituency, fishermen are very worried about choke species with cod, which they cannot avoid catching. I wonder whether she feels the same about cod fisheries?

Mrs Murray: Absolutely. I wanted to point out what Bertie Armstrong had said, wholly and solely because, off the south-west coast, in areas VIIa and VIIe—or VIIb to VIIk, actually, which is the whole of the south coast—UK fishermen have a tiny proportion of the EU total allowable catch. They get something like 8% of that quota, compared with 80% for our French counterparts. That is what causes the concern and the problems, because if there is cod on the ground, fishermen cannot stop the cod swimming into their nets, and many have to be discarded. What happens when fishermen catch a net full of cod? They cannot land it, but they cannot throw it away either. That is a good illustration of the problem with the landing obligation under the top-heavy bureaucratic common fisheries policy.

I have mentioned the south-west and area VIIe, but I want to point out to the Minister some of the proposals that are on the table for the North sea stocks. I understand from the National Federation of Fishermen Organisations that the proposals are for a 22% reduction in whiting, a 33% reduction in cod and a 31% reduction in haddock. What will the Minister do to rebalance that?

If all the fish, using zonal attachment, were available for the British fishing fleet to catch and land from when we leave the European Union—my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have said that we will leave the common fisheries policy on March 29 2019 at 11 o’clock in the evening—it would certainly benefit the United Kingdom and our economy. We should look to redress the imbalance that has been heaped on the industry for more than 40 years.

Other hon. Members want to speak, and we have only a short time for the debate, so, in summary, I wish to hear what the Minister will do at the Council. Will he send a message to our European partners that when the United Kingdom leaves on March 29 2019, we will honour our obligations under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea and the United Nations fish stocks agreement—particularly article 62—and set quotas in a sustainable way, as is our obligation, but make available to other nations only the surplus of fish that the UK fleet cannot catch? It will be interesting to hear what my hon. Friend the Minister has to say at the end of the debate. I will finish now, because I promised other hon. Members who want to contribute that I would speak only for a short time.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who introduced the debate extremely well, for being concise and for giving other hon. Members a good chance. I call Brendan O’Hara.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I, again, congratulate the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this extremely important debate. Had it not been for events elsewhere, which I fear have conspired against us, it could have made the front pages tomorrow morning.

All hon. Members who represent fishing communities know the importance of the industry—not just to those directly involved in the catching and processing side of the business, but to the overall economic wellbeing of our coastal communities. The fishing industry in my constituency has undergone great changes in the last few years and would be almost unrecognisable to someone who fished the waters of the west coast of Scotland a few decades ago. Back then, herring was the mainstay of the local industry, but changes to technology and a focus on new species has seen a move away from herring towards prawn and scallop fishing.

Today, freshly caught high-quality Argyll and Bute seafood is in demand across the world, particularly in Europe, as I said earlier. I am delighted that the fishing industry remains a mainstay of our local economy. Of course, in Argyll and Bute we also have a thriving fish farming industry, which includes award-winning halibut producers on Gigha and salmon from Argyll, which boasts the prestigious Label Rouge, awarded under the most stringent criteria by the French Ministry of Agriculture.

As well as praising and promoting the excellent produce, I want to highlight some of the issues and challenges facing boat owners, skippers and producers on Scotland’s west coast. What I am about to say will come as no great surprise to attentive hon. Members, because I said it last year—and, I believe, the year before that.

Despite being raised by MPs representing the west of Scotland and Northern Ireland for many years, the issue of access to crew persists. It is a problem that only the UK Government can fix, but they have chosen not to. Once again, I ask the Government to relax the rules and allow non-European economic area crew to work on fishing vessels that operate inside the 12-mile limit on the west coast. One look at a map of the west coast of Scotland shows that the 12-mile limit extends vast distances into the Atlantic. Few inshore vessels can or will travel that distance, but they are told repeatedly that they cannot recruit professional international seafarers from countries such as the Philippines or Ghana, and can use only UK or EU nationals to crew their vessels.

Last year, I highlighted the case of Jonathan McAllister, a skipper from Oban who was struggling to find suitable crew. He eventually found a crew of EU nationals from Latvia, who worked so well as share fishermen that they were invited back this year. In May, Mr McAllister contacted me again to say that one of the Latvian crew members had been refused entry to the UK and had been detained and questioned about the non-filing of a tax return.

Those allegations turned out to be utterly baseless, but on that basis, the crew member was detained at the Dungavel detention centre, pending his deportation to Latvia. That EU national, an experienced professional seafarer who had come to work legally in Scotland, was detained for seven days before being released without charge. He was then able to join his shipmates in Oban freely, but at what cost to Mr McAllister’s business?

The entire crew have already said to Mr McAllister that, regardless of the political situation in the UK, they will not return in 2019, so he will have to find yet another crew. Even when our skippers jump through the hoops the Home Office set for them, they are still penalised. It is little wonder that so many are totally scunnered and are seeking a way out of the industry.
Access to crew is just one issue affecting the west coast fishing industry. Last week, I met the Clyde Fishermen’s Association, which represents 65 boats, including mobile and static vessels. We met principally to discuss the Fisheries Bill, but we also spoke generally about the health of the industry on the west coast of Scotland. Naturally, Brexit and anything that would adversely affect the association’s ability to export directly into Europe was a huge concern, as over almost four decades our west coast fishermen have perfected getting their catch out of the water and delivering it fresh to some of the best restaurants in Europe in a matter of hours. Reports of six months of disruption at the ports post Brexit would be absolutely catastrophic for its members.

Another area of huge concern on the west coast is the possibility of having to work within a different regulatory framework from colleagues in Northern Ireland, who, because of the backstop protocol, would essentially retain unfettered access to the single market and the customs union. It is worth remembering that Northern Ireland is just 12 miles from my constituency, so we fish in the same waters for the same catch. Indeed, on a clear day, I reckon I could see the house of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) from the edge of my constituency.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is the one with the Union flag on the chimney.

Brendan O’Hara: Let me say to the hon. Lady that the two most certainly do not go hand in hand.

Mrs Murray: They do!

Brendan O’Hara: If that is the hon. Lady’s argument, then she is saying something about Ruth Davidson, the leader of the Scottish Conservative party. Ruth Davidson said on 1 October:

“I voted to remain. I fought for remain. If there was another vote tomorrow, I would still vote remain.”

The extension of the hon. Lady’s argument is that Ruth Davidson is a supporter of the CFP, which I think Ruth Davidson herself would agree with. There is nothing to say that remaining and seeking to reform the CFP are mutually exclusive: they are not mutually exclusive. We can remain in the European Union and we can fight to reform the CFP.

Mrs Murray: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can explain to us why the previous leader of the Scottish National party, who was formerly the Member for Gordon and before that the Member for Banff and Buchan, actually put a Bill before the House to withdraw from the CFP. If what the hon. Gentleman is saying is absolutely correct, he is disagreeing with his former leader.

Brendan O’Hara: I do not think I am disagreeing with my former leader. What I am saying is that one can remain within the European Union and have a reform of the CFP—

Mrs Murray: You can’t!

Brendan O’Hara: The CFP is a political decision and it can be reformed. If consecutive UK Governments had not sacrificed everything, including the fishing industry, to get where we are, we would not be in the situation that we are in now.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I remind all Members here in Westminster Hall that in our 2017 manifesto we committed to either fundamental reform of the CFP or its complete scrapping. And it was in 2004 that the former party leader, who I think
was the Member for Banff and Buchan at that time, introduced a private Member’s Bill calling for the scrapping of the CFP.

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Since the 1970s, it has been the Scottish National party that has opposed the CFP. We have opposed it; we have sought its reform; and any record in Hansard will show that that is the case.

The fishing communities across the UK did not need Brexit to thrive and survive; they needed a Government who cared and put their interests first. I look forward, with certainty, to the day when that Government is an independent Scottish Government, who will look after the interests of all our fishermen and not throw them under a bus at the first opportunity, as has been the case in the United Kingdom throughout the years of the CFP.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. It might be of interest to Members that from now onwards a limit of six minutes per speaker would be advisable.

9.55 am

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry, and I will try to be as quick as I can.

I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this debate, which is about a subject that I know is very close to her own heart as well as being a key industry in her constituency.

Fishing at least has been, if it is not now, the lifeblood of constituencies represented by hon. Members. Members around this Chamber today. Under the European Union’s common fisheries policy, we have seen many smaller fishing constituencies—and, in some cases, not so small fishing communities—reduced to a mere shadow of their former glory. I am sure that hon. Members would agree that, regardless of how else we might feel about Brexit, the CFP is a discredit to our coastal communities that we must take every possible opportunity to redress.

My own constituency of Banff and Buchan has fared relatively well in the last few decades, Peterhead being the largest whitefish port in Europe and Fraserburgh the largest port in Europe for nephrops. Although those ports survive, overall activities are not what they once were. As we look forward to a “sea of opportunity”, it is not only those brave fishermen who go out to sea to catch the fish who stand to benefit. We must also see an expansion in our capacity to process the product. We need to improve infrastructure and transport links, and perhaps invest in chiller facilities at one of the Scottish airports to help facilitate the export of fish to countries further afield than the EU, such as in north America and the far east.

An expansion in our ability to catch more of our fish in our waters will also see a benefit to those services and industries that support the fishing sector: boat building, maintenance and servicing are just a few examples. One local fisherman told me recently that when his boat is in for annual maintenance and he berths it in dry dock, he provides work for around 40 different contractors, mostly from around the local community and certainly from around north-east Scotland. The more fishing opportunities that we have, the more active our fishing boats will be, and the better things will be for the wider coastal communities and the economy.

Mr Carmichael: I think that the figure produced by the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation is that something in the region of 40% of the fish in our waters are caught by the UK fleet. I think the hon. Gentleman is a supporter of the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement and deal. What share does he expect the UK fleet will have at the end of the day if that agreement is implemented?

David Duguid: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. Of course, there is nothing in the withdrawal agreement that specifically states that any shares will be given up. As my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall said earlier, we should start from the default position of, “We have full access and that is our access to negotiate in the annual negotiations going forward.”

I will move on. The Scottish demersal sector has performed reasonably well during 2018, but the prognosis for 2019 is less buoyant, given the reduction in total allowable catches for some of our key commercial stocks, such as North sea haddock and cod. The TACs for the jointly managed stocks with Norway, which were set as a result of negotiations that have been concluded, have already been listed by my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall.

The TACs for stocks such as anglerfish, hake and so on are due to be set at the December Fisheries Council. Such reductions, at a time when the landing obligation is due to come fully into force, could be problematic to say the least. The reduction in North sea cod could make it a choke species for the fleet. The landing obligation is explicit in the demand that catches of all regulated species must be landed ashore. Once the quota of North sea cod is exhausted, the fleet will be required to stop fishing for the other major species, such as haddock, whiting, saithe, hake and anglerfish.

There is a significant and real risk that tens of millions of pounds of fish could go uncaught as a result. I ask the Minister to give some clarity today about the action he will take to avoid early closure of our fisheries. What discussions has he had with the devolved Administrations on this matter?

There is real concern about the number of non-UK vessels operating in the Scottish sector, mostly in the waters around Shetland, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) will appreciate. A recent analysis carried out by the industry set the numbers of vessels catching whitefish as follows: 19 UK-based but foreign-flagged vessels; 12 Spanish vessels; 33 Norwegian vessels; eight German vessels; 27 French vessels; and 23 Danish vessels—a total of 122 vessels.

To provide some scale, the Scottish fleet has only about 85 vessels targeting whitefish. Does the Minister agree that an influx of foreign vessels at this level is unsustainable for stocks and clearly unfair to our fishermen? What does he plan to do to protect our stocks from being plundered by foreign vessels?

Finally, as the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) mentioned, access to non-EEA crew continues to be an issue for a number of our vessels,
given that they are prohibited from operating within 12 nautical miles of the shore. Non-EEA workers enter the country to work on a fishing vessel using a transit visa, the current definition of which allows vessels to operate out of the UK without entering a foreign port, so long as they stay outside of 12 miles while fishing. The skipper of a vessel is required to demonstrate to the overseas British embassy that his vessel has operated for the previous three months outside of 12 miles; only then will the fisherman be granted his visa.

The situation has led to a number of vessels being sold due to crew shortages, particularly on the west coast of Scotland. We have made several representations on a cross-party basis to the UK Immigration Minister for the 12-mile restriction to be removed, so that every segment of our fleet can get access to the same pool of labour. There are currently 4,900 full-time fishermen in Scotland, of which over 800 are non-EEA. Given the current plight of our vessels when it comes to finding suitable crew, I ask the Minister to push for that 12-mile restriction to be lifted.

10.1 am

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship in this important debate, Sir Henry, and I congratulate the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing what has become a useful annual fixture in the calendar, ahead of the Fisheries Council that the Minister is now very familiar with. I will take this opportunity to remember and commemorate all of those who go out and fish for the benefit of their communities and the whole country. Those people are in what is still the riskiest occupation in the whole of the country, and they deserve our thanks for the work they do, as does the Royal National Lifeboat Institution. I notice that a small situation occurred off the coast of the hon. Lady’s constituency in recent days, when the RNLI was required to go out and rescue a French vessel that broke down. It is not just those directly involved in the fishing industry, but all those associated with maritime activities, who deserve our thanks.

Mrs Sheryll Murray: I wholeheartedly support what the hon. Lady has said. Will she also recognise the work of the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, which provides support not only for UK fishermen, but also for those from other member states who find themselves in trouble or hardship off the coast of the United Kingdom?

Melanie Onn: Yes, absolutely. The hon. Lady makes a powerful point, and she is right to recognise the work of that organisation. I will also take this opportunity to remember our colleague and former Member of this House, Margaret Curran, who has been very unwell. She used to make valuable contributions when she was an elected Member, and we are the poorer for her no longer being in this House.

The hon. Member for South East Cornwall was assiduous in pointing out how important this Fisheries Council is going to be; this will be its final meeting, and will set the tone for all our future fishing relationships. The general nature of fishing lends itself to becoming quickly adversarial over territorial and quota disputes, but there is an enormous amount of room for generating good relations with those countries that have traditionally fished alongside UK vessels. We might not like it, and the fishing industry of the UK might not like it, but even if we eventually are in the driving seat, taking back control of our waters—that is language that I do not like to use, but that is what is hoped for within the industry—so that we can decide who fishes, where they fish and how much they fish for, we will still require good relations in the future, because we do not want to see any conflict or aggression over borders or quotas. I cannot see how this House could possibly wish to encourage any kind of negativity or conflict over those issues, which is why it is all the more important that the Minister sets the tone and the boundaries of expectations going forward.

The hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara) said that successive Governments have failed on the CFP, and have not taken a strong enough stand. I suspect that the Minister may wish to dispute that, given his endeavours in recent years, but it seems that the selling out of the UK fishing industry in the withdrawal agreement is history repeating itself a little bit. There is no guarantee in the withdrawal agreement that anything will change: the Minister has said that for the next two years, he does not expect a great deal to change, and beyond that, we really do not know. The withdrawal agreement is wholly unsatisfactory to an industry that is looking for more certainty, and for a redress—a rebalance—of the inherent unfairness that they see as having been inflicted on them for a number of years.

I recognise that other hon. Members want to contribute to this debate, so I will just touch on the east coast specifically. We have traditionally had a very different industry from that of the south-west or Scotland: we were a deep-sea area, with deep-sea fisheries that were going into Atlantic waters—although the people of Whitby and Bridlington will no doubt say otherwise, because their fleets were much more inshore and smaller. The instrumental thing for Grimsby, about which I cannot get a satisfactory answer from the Government, is our relationships with Iceland and Norway. We will still want access to those waters, so what will be the impact of the European economic area and European Free Trade Association agreements that Norway and Iceland have with the EU? How will that affect the UK once we have left the EU? That is if we actually leave—it is all looking decidedly ropey today. How will that affect those agreements? That is why I urge the Minister to continue those good relations, because we will still need good relations with those countries and with the EU if we are to continue the relationship that we have at the moment.

I am going over time—sorry, Sir Henry. I will just say that to some of those larger fleets, as UK Fisheries Limited has said, for the east coast of England, Brexit means that “UK fishing opportunities, including access and quota, will only be traded if there is a reciprocal benefit to the UK and that there will be a fairer share of the fish in UK waters allocated to UK fishermen. This has the potential to correct the current situation where fishing vessels from the East Coast are prevented from going to sea due to lack of quota, while those from other countries can continue to fish. There are, however, a number of threats that are particular to the fleet based in the area.”

I will write to the Minister with more detail, if that is okay, to allow colleagues to make their contributions.
10.8 am

**Derek Thomas** (St Ives) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing this debate. I also congratulate my hon. Members on the way in which we have worked together to give everyone an opportunity to speak. I will do what I can to stick to the time I have.

It is good to be able to discuss this issue before next week’s Fisheries Council, and there are a few things about the European Commission that I would like to raise on behalf of fishermen in and around west Cornwall and on the Isles of Scilly. First, bass has been a contentious subject for a few years now. As has been said before, bass is not the biggest share of the fish we catch, but it is a premium fish that is part of all aspects of fishing in west Cornwall. Will the Minister provide some clarity on measures to manage the recovery of bass stock? Has supply a training opportunity and training ground for their contributions this morning, and I look forward in particular to the responses of the Minister and also the shadow Minister, who has deep knowledge of the sector. W e can also supply a training opportunity and training ground for the inshore fleet. We have heard today how diverse it is, but we have four key areas. In my constituency, we have the over-10s; the under-10s and the inshore fleet; a mixed fishery—bycatch and discards are a real challenge, because they catch what they never targeted—and sea angling, which is a significant part of our local economy. As we move beyond the common fisheries policy, there is good reason to respond to the asks of the industry. In Cornwall, the fish producers have asked the Government to set up a formal advisory council to guide policy and promote collaboration from Government, devolved Administrations, regions and the industry. It is imperative that the industry sits around that table.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) discussed the challenges of dispute resolution. The fishing community in my community and across Cornwall has asked the Government to set up a dispute resolution mechanism to address differences across the regions, the devolved Administrations and international fisheries so that we do not have years and years of problematic disputes that prevent people from fishing for a living and from providing good nutritious food. Will the Minister give some indication as to whether those two requests—the advisory committee and the dispute resolution mechanism—are being considered seriously?

10.14 am

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), who spoke, as she often does, with authority and with knowledge and experience of the fishing sector. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to participate in this debate and for going ahead with it—by the way, that is not something we can trust in any longer with the business of the House. The fact of the matter is that we are discussing this issue because it is of such importance. I thank all hon. and right hon. Members for their contributions this morning, and I look forward in particular to the responses of the Minister and also the shadow Minister, who has deep knowledge of the issue.

I represent the fishing village of Portavogie. It is the second largest fishing village in the whole of Northern Ireland. It used to have 130 boats in the harbour. A person used to be able to cross the harbour without touching the water, just by walking across the decks of the boats. That is no longer possible, as the number of boats has reduced to 75. Why is that? It is due to EU bureaucracy and red tape. There are other key issues, including crew. The fishermen and fisherwomen of Portavogie look forward to leaving the EU and to being unfettered and free. Boy, we cannot wait. We look forward to that occasion.

Leaving aside the fact that this will be the last EU Fisheries Council at which the United Kingdom plays a full role, it is far from business as usual. Previous EU decisions dictate that fish stocks will be managed, by 2020 at the latest, according to the principle of maximum sustainable yield. The Minister knows the issue well. Importantly, the EU’s landing obligation, or discard ban, will be fully implemented from 1 January 2019.

With those factors in mind, the landscape for this December’s negotiations in Brussels will be complicated enough, even without Brexit in the background. In the Irish sea, fishermen will always contend that there is no room for improvement with fisheries science. We need to put on record the commitment of Northern Ireland fishermen to that science. Discussions are ongoing to
utilise the industry’s assets to expand acoustic surveys of the demersal species in the area, which have been valuable in changing the perception of Irish sea herring in particular. We work with nature, and sometimes what goes up comes down. That is a flaw in the concept of maximum sustainable yield, which argues that all stocks can be maintained at a maximum level. Nature just does not work like that. It is not straightforward by any means.

The industry has accepted the scientific advice for the most economically important fishery in the Irish sea for Northern Ireland, which is nephrops—prawns. Portavogie prawns are renowned across Europe. They are exported, and it is important to put that on the record. Any change to the total allowable catch should reflect the advice of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, which includes scientific assumptions on survivability.

To be specific, our aim should be for a TAC that reflects the landing figure plus dead discards. That principle has been accepted for other species with high survival rates. The result should mean a percentage reduction in TAC that is in the low 20s, not the 32% advocated by Brussels. Again, I express some concern. We met the Minister last week, which was most constructive and helpful, and I thank him for that. We met the Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation, the Irish Fish Producers Organisation and my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson). I look to the Minister to address the discrepancy and make a commitment on that.

The TAC for whiting is the top priority for the Irish sea in 2019. Of all the TAC issues, Irish sea whiting has some rather unique issues and is a priority. The Commission has proposed a TAC of 612 tonnes for next year, solely to cover the bycatch in the nephrop fishery. The fishing of the nephrop fishery by the UK fleet outstrips that of the Republic of Ireland by a factor of four to one, which again underlines its importance. That approach is unlikely to win support from the Republic of Ireland. Its application of the Hague preference would see it secure more than half of the quota in a fishery where it takes about 20% of the catch. We do not share the faith that some have that the Republic of Ireland would be willing to apportion the Union quota on the grounds of need without using it as a swap currency to extract other quota species from the UK. The conclusion is that we need to aim for Irish sea whiting to be treated uniquely, by making it a temporary prohibited stock—in other words, removing it from the list of TAC species.

The imposition by Ireland of the Hague preference mechanism continues to hang over quota allocations. As the United Kingdom leaves the common fisheries policy, the Hague preference will no longer apply to Irish sea stocks. That outdated quota distribution methodology will fall, and at the very least UK fishermen in the Irish sea will immediately recover the one third of their quotas for cod, whiting and plaice that they have annually handed to the Republic of Ireland, and which the Republic of Ireland has gratefully accepted, despite its feigned economic and social concern for the community in Northern Ireland.

That feigned concern extends to the hard sea border that the Dublin Government have erected and maintained against fishermen from Northern Ireland. The Minister knows the voisinage agreement very well, and I do not need to go into the issue in any detail. It was among the issues highlighted in the report by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. The recommendation was clear: encourage the Dublin Government to resolve their part of the reciprocal agreement, or face the UK’s withdrawal from that agreement. Interested parties in the Republic of Ireland talk about the noise coming from Northern Ireland on the issue, and they have every right to acknowledge it. However, they should not forget that about 40% of the fish and shellfish captured by the Irish fishing fleet come from UK waters.

It should be left to the United Kingdom’s fisheries administrations to decide how quotas are allocated. Quotas are a massive issue within each jurisdiction, reflecting the different nature of the fishing fleets in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. We are better together; let us work together on this matter as well. The Fishing (Access to Territorial Waters) Bill recognises the principle of equal access by UK-registered fishing fleets to all UK waters.

Increased TACs, be they as a result of decisions made at the December Fisheries Council or of a new fisheries agreement with the UK, will be pointless unless we have the ability to catch the fish. That comes back to the key issue of crews, which the Minister and Members know about. Filipino crews are consistently dependable. They come to work, do the business and commit themselves totally to it. We spoke to the Minister about that last week, and I know he shares our concerns, as does the shadow Minister. We look forward to some help in persuading the Home Office to put those fishermen into the skilled category, thus enabling them to become part of what we want for our fishing fleets across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

As the Minister prepares to wish his EU opposite numbers “bon voyage” at the end of next week’s Fisheries Council, we send him good wishes in his endeavours. He has proven himself to be a friend of the industry in Northern Ireland and the whole of the United Kingdom. His judgment, and that of his officials from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland, and the Departments in Scotland and Wales, is fundamental to securing a deal that is in the national interests of the United Kingdom as a whole. We look forward to a sustainable result.

10.22 am

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on securing the debate, but observe in passing that it is somewhat unsatisfactory that we are in Westminster Hall and limited to 90 minutes on a Wednesday morning. This debate was traditionally part of Chamber business, and happened in Government time. I understand the reasons why it was taken out of Government time, which I think were sound. However, it was always the understanding that time would be available, and for us to have to rely on a ballot for the annual fishing debate is unsatisfactory. I hope the Minister will make representations to those in charge of business management within Government to ensure that we are not put in this situation again.
As the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute said, it particularly
been going; it does not look particularly joined-up from
I wonder how that work as a joined-up Government has
Times change, and arguments of a different nature
seem to be advanced these days, but it is worth putting
those historical accuracies on the record. Also on a
point of historical accuracy, the hon. Member for
Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) said that
Alex Salmond wanted to abolish the common fisheries
policy. That was a tweak that I introduced; originally,
Alex Salmond’s Bill was for withdrawal from the common
fisheries policy. Personally, I was never persuaded that
that was possible, but it is all largely academic and of
historical interest these days.

The Fisheries Council, to which the Minister will
tavel next week, is the last that we will know in the
current set-up. It will be interesting to see what we are
able do this time next year if we are out of the European
Union but still part of the common fisheries policy, as
the transitional arrangements would suggest. It will not
be an easy Council. The Minister is aware that the
scientific advice, especially in relation to North sea cod,
is challenging, and that will produce a difficult outcome.
I am sure he will argue with some force and vigour that
the interests of our fleet should be maintained. I wish
him well in that enterprise. I would be interested to hear
how he anticipates advancing that argument this time
next year, when we will not be at the table. As the hon.
Member for South East Cornwall said, we will not have a
voice.

Ahead of that, there is, today and tomorrow, the
EU-Faroes bilateral in relation to pelagic stocks. The
apportionment allows the Faroese fleet access to 30% of
the mackerel in EU waters—something of a misnomer,
because they are essentially Shetlands waters. We have
been burdened with an exceptionally bad deal. It allows
us access to 30% of the stocks in their waters, but
frankly 30% of quite a lot can hardly be compared with
30% of very little, which is essentially what we get out of
the deal. Will the Minister tell me what he has done to
influence the progress of the talks and to ensure that the
interests of the pelagic fleet in Shetland in particular are
better treated than they have been in the past, and how
he anticipates such an arrangement will work in the
future?

Other hon. Members spoke about the need for visas
for non-EEA nationals. I led an Adjournment debate
on that on 11 July. The Immigration Minister told me
that she accepted that it was something that needed
“work as a joined-up Government.”—[Official Report, 11 July 2018;
Vol. 644, c. 1084.]
I wonder how that work as a joined-up Government has
been going; it does not look particularly joined-up from
where I see it today. However, it is of enormous importance.
As the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute said, it particularly
affects the inshore fleet, but it also has a serious effect in
relation to the bigger boats in the whitefish and the pelagic sectors.

Essentially, to get round the lack of proper working
visas, fishing crews are having to come in on transit
visas. The welfare issues surrounding that are well
documented. The real difficulty is that it leaves fishing
skippers having to fish where visa regulations allow
them to, not where they know they will find fish.
Eventually that will have an impact on safety—we all
know that. That is why the issue cannot be kicked down
the road any more. The subject commands attention on
behalf of fishing communities represented on both
sides of the House. I have been on delegations with the
hon. Members for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid),
for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)
and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). As we come to the
end of the year, I say to the Minister that if he is
genuinely part of a joined-up Government, we need to
see a resolution to this issue.

I have had my six minutes, Sir Henry—I could talk
for an awful lot longer. I leave a minute, which I hope
might be given to the Minister, if the Front Benchers
can maintain good discipline, so that we all have an
opportunity to intervene on him when he speaks.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I am grateful to
you, Mr Carmichael, for being so concise in your remarks.
I call Deidre Brock.

10.29 am

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It
is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Henry.
I pay tribute to the hon. Member for South East Cornwall
(Mrs Murray), whose long-standing commitment to the
cause of fishing safety is a badge of honour and who is
compendiously tireless in her pursuit of a safer environment
for people who work in the industry. She clearly has a
very personal knowledge of the fishing industry; her
personal loss means that she speaks with profound
understanding of what is so often at stake for so many
of the crews who go out to bring back fish. I cannot
imagine what it takes to continue to campaign, as she
does, for a better situation for them.

I speak from a less personal standpoint, but I absolutely
acknowledge the nature of the task that the fleets face
on each trip out to sea. I also recognise the unrelenting
nature of the job and the difficult economic circumstances
that face the fleets and the communities that depend on
them. The uncertainties attached to working in the
industry, onshore as well as offshore, must only be
heightened by the chaos that dogs the Brexit process.
I have to say that things are a little calmer in this Chamber
today than they have been in the main Chamber over
the past couple of days. Staid and sober consideration
of the issues before us is certainly a better way to
proceed.

I commend the hon. Lady for what she said about the
comments quoted from the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation.
She made the important point that those words have
been taken out of context and misquoted; I commend
her honesty, and I hope that when hon. Members
discuss these matters in the future, they will hear her
wise words. She and other hon. Members also spoke
about the Fisheries Council meeting next week—the
last time the Minister has a voice at the table. A very
important point arising from the flawed deal that the
Offshore and has significant onshore economic impact. There are something like 1,800 shellfish boats in the marketplace in the world’s most affluent continent. Have automatic barrier-free access to the world’s biggest situation than any other part of the UK. We will be fleets, which should not be in a less advantageous be sorted out in advance of Brexit day.

The concerns of pelagic and whitefish fleets may be slightly different but they, too, require open markets. Around three quarters of the fish and seafood landed is exported, while around two thirds of the fish and seafood we eat is imported. Trade with the EU is essential for the fishing industry. We should probably see whether there is some kind of organisation that we can join that would allow us free access to those markets and keep food imports at a reasonable price—if only we could think of one.

There is a cruelty for our fishing fleets in the fact that they will be trapped in the CFP after we leave the EU and will therefore still have to comply with the rules after we have lost the ability to influence them. So much of what we heard before the referendum was simply untrue, but that is one of the cruellest tricks of all.

A host of other questions about Brexit and fishing are still unanswered, not the least of which is how the European maritime and fisheries fund will be replaced. The development of the fishing industries around these islands may be hampered if we do not have a replacement ready to go. The improvements to the boats, including health and safety improvements, that such schemes fund are important, but so are the shore-based improvements, and the environmental spend is of incalculable value.

We also need to know about access to the labour market for the industry. Like agriculture, the work of onshore fisheries in Scotland depends to a large extent on EU migrant workers, so closing us off from them will damage the profitability of the industry. I know that some Members of Parliament are dead set on ending freedom of movement, but the argument is about what to replace it with.

Some have argued that we should look at the Australian system; if I can don my outback hat for a while, I reckon that there is a new Australian scheme that might just fit the bill. The Australian Minister for Immigration, Citizenship and Multicultural Affairs says that his Government “is working to improve our immigration program to better match the needs of specific locations”.

The Northern Territory and south-west Victoria will have immigration schemes that allow in agricultural workers and hospitality workers to service the industries that desperately need them. The schemes, known as designated area migration agreements, will allow permanent residency in those areas, provided that people are willing to remain there for at least three years. I suggest that such a scheme would be helpful to the food production industries in Scotland and should be considered by any Government who value the contribution that those industries make.

We may or may not be leaving the EU soon, and we may or may not be getting a vote on it at some point, but it is high time we had a serious chat about how we want to protect our fishing communities and how we enhance them.

10.37 am

**Luke Pollard** (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I thank my neighbour from the far south-west, the hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray), for introducing the debate so well.
Luke Pollard: I join in the tributes to all those fishers who have lost their lives since our last annual fisheries debate. Since I was elected last year, we in Plymouth have lost two trawlers at sea, with a death on each boat. I pay tribute to all those who risk their lives in the most dangerous peacetime activity in Britain to catch the fish that we have on our dinner plates. I also pay tribute to those who keep our fishers safe and supported: the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, HM Coastguard, the Fishermen’s Mission, the Royal Navy and a group that is so often overlooked—the family and friends of fishers, who provide the support network, encouragement and understanding, and without whom the industry would not work.

I speak not only as shadow Fisheries Minister, but as an MP who represents Plymouth—a proud and historic coastal community with 1,000 jobs in fishing, both in catching and in processing. We have not said much about processing today, but it is a vital part of our fishing industry.

Melanie Onn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning the processing sector, which employs approximately 5,000 people in my constituency and is intrinsically linked to the catching sector. It should not be forgotten in these debates.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The question we need to ask about processing is where the fish will come from in the future. We need to ensure that fish can be imported and exported with the added value that comes from processing, creating more processing jobs in the UK rather than putting the jobs we have at risk.

Fishing was the poster child of the leave campaign. It is one of the few industries in the entire UK—if not the only industry—that could be better on day one of Brexit than before it, but only if tariff-free access and frictionless trade can be achieved, in terms of making sure that we can export to our important export markets. I am no fan of the common fisheries policy—that has been briefly discussed here—and it needs to change and be improved. Fishing has every right to be concerned about the promises that come from processing, creating more processing jobs in the UK rather than putting the jobs we have at risk.

Mrs Murray: I anticipate that the hon. Gentleman will move on to fixed quota allocations; before he does, I hope he will acknowledge that those allocations were introduced under a previous Labour Fisheries Minister. Another mess also created under the same Minister is the reason why the under-10-metre fleet finds itself in the position it does today. I will name the Fisheries Minister at the time—it was Elliot Morley.

Luke Pollard: I am always grateful for interventions from my neighbour. I suggest she reads the memo from the Fisheries Minister in Committee yesterday that said this is about looking forwards, not back. Frankly, there are enough reasons to say that fishing was screwed over by a Conservative Government; I do not think it is appropriate to go into—

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Order. You cannot really use such language.

Luke Pollard: Okay, I withdraw that—I beg your pardon, Sir Henry. Fishing may have been betrayed by Conservative Governments in the past. Let us look forward, not back.

Labour wants smaller boats to be given a greater share of quota after Brexit. Small boats are the backbone of our fishing industry. They are the small and medium-sized...
enterprises of the sector. If this were any other sector, we would be talking about SMEs and multinationals, but we do not do that in fishing—we simply do not apply that process today. If we did, I think the tone of the debate around our fishing sector would be very different. Let us back the SMEs in the fishing sector. Let us make sure that the small-scale fleet, which generally uses low-impact gear, has a better environmental impact and, importantly, employs more people, gets a greater share of quota: 6% of quota and 49% of the workforce at the moment is not an equitable share.

In addition, we also need to make sure that more fish is landed in UK ports. Labour wants a requirement that at least 50% of fish caught under a British quota is landed in British ports, supporting the coastal communities—be they in the far south-west, the east coast or up to Scotland—and making sure that we can get the additional jobs that come with landing, processing and selling that fish, whether for consumption in the UK or for export. We want to make sure that we have more of it. It is a travesty that, at the moment, so much fish caught under a UK quota is exported immediately to foreign countries and not landed. We need to preserve that economic link.

I want to spend a moment on marine safety; we have an opportunity to talk more about that. Fishing is the most dangerous peacetime activity in the UK. We need to make sure that in any redistribution or reallocation of quota that may come from leaving the European Union, high standards of marine safety are embedded in every single quota allocation. That is precisely why we need to do more to make sure that EU and UK fisheries obey the same high safety levels. Sadly, that is again something that the Minister decided to vote against in Committee yesterday.

We also need to do more to spread the best practice we already have. In Plymouth, a lifejacket scheme gives fishers better equipped lifejackets, to enable them to do manual handling in front, with a personal locator beacon. When someone goes overboard and the personal locator beacon is activated, it takes the “search” out of search and rescue. That is really important, and will help save lives when boats capsize or when people go over the side. When the worst happens, it will help with the retrieval of a body so that the family can bury that fisher. We need to be aware of just how dangerous fishing is. The Minister and I have had lots of conversations about the PLB and the lifejacket scheme and I will continue to have conversations with the Department for Transport to make sure that it happens.

I echo the comments from the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), who was passionate and correct in the view that this debate should be held in Government time. He heard me make that point yesterday, and he made it with much more force than I did in Committee. There is cross-party agreement that this annual debate should be held in Government time and in the main Chamber to give it the prominence and importance that it deserves—not only to our coastal communities, but to our politics. In many cases, fishing is about politics and identity just as much as it is about our coastal communities.

There is a great opportunity to create a better system for fishing—more economically and environmentally sustainable, safer for those people who are fishing, and adapted to the changing nature of our marine environment, especially with the effects of climate change. It is an opportunity that we cannot afford to miss. I pledge to the Minister that if he wants to work constructively, in a co-operative, cross-party way to improve the Fisheries Bill, which needs improving, the Opposition stand ready.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his dynamic speech. The hon. Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) has indicated to me that she does not want time for a wind-up speech, so that leaves the Minister with 12 minutes. I call the Minister.

10.48 am

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Thank you, Sir Henry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) on introducing our annual fisheries debate.

A number of us in this room spent a full day in Committee yesterday debating the Fisheries Bill. Immediately after this debate, at 11 o’clock, I am giving evidence on fisheries to the Lords EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee. This afternoon, at half-past two, I am giving evidence on fisheries to the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and tomorrow we have another day of debate on the Bill. So it is very much a diet of fish for me this week, and rightly so. For our fishing industry, this is a critical time of year, when fishing opportunities are set.

Our fishing, aquaculture and processing industries are worth around £1.5 billion a year to our economy. They employ 33,000 people and have incredible significance to many of our coastal communities, not least, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said, those where much of our processing is done.

Fishing is also, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) pointed out, one of the most dangerous occupations in the country. The risks that fishermen take to put food on our table are something that we must always acknowledge. I am sad to say that, during 2018, six fishermen from this country lost their lives in the course of their work. I am sure we all send our condolences to the families involved.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport has campaigned on safety issues for a long time, alongside his constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall, who herself was affected by a personal tragedy in this area. Partly due to my hon. Friend’s lobbying, there was an announcement in this year’s Budget that a new fund would be created to invest in safety equipment to improve the safety of our fishing vessels. That is an important step forward, but we must remain constantly vigilant.

The focus of today’s debate is predominantly on the December Agriculture and Fisheries Council, which is taking place next week, and that is what I want to focus most of my comments on, although I recognise that it is taking place in a wider context. This is the last December Council for which the UK will be a member of the European Union. There is a live debate about the nature of the withdrawal agreement and any implementation period as we depart from the European Union. As I mentioned earlier, the Fisheries Bill is going through Parliament at the moment. The Committee
debate began yesterday, and we have another day ahead of us tomorrow. The Bill sets out all the powers the Government need in order to take back control of our exclusive economic zone, to license foreign vessels, to prohibit them from entering our waters to fish in the absence of a licence, and to set fishing opportunities and quotas. As we leave the European Union, we will become an independent coastal state again. We will represent ourselves in negotiations with our neighbours, including the Faroes, Iceland, Norway and the rest of the European Union.

I return to this year’s annual negotiations. As a number of hon. Members pointed out, this year, in most of our waters, the position is undoubtedly more challenging as far as the science is concerned—in the North sea, in particular. The EU-Norway deal has now concluded, but the science was very challenging on a number of key stocks. There have been some significant reductions in the EU-Norway deal, with whiting down by 22%, cod down by 33% and haddock down by 31%. It is important to recognise that, over the past three years, there have been significant rises in those stocks, as the science was positive. Just as we will increase the fishing opportunities when the science allows it, we must be willing to take the difficult decision to reduce fishing opportunities when the science demands it.

It is not all bad news. There has been an increase in saithe, which is up by 18%, and plaice, which is up by 11%. The proposal for anglerfish in the North sea is plus 25%, western hake is plus 27%, and megrim in the wider area is up by 47%. There are some positive notes this year, but the overall background is challenging.

This year’s Council will be dominated by one issue: the problem of choke species, which I want to spend most of my comments reflecting on. We are in the final year of the introduction of the landing obligation. That means that, next year, every species must be covered by the landing obligation. That presents major challenges for parts of our fleet, notably cod in the Celtic sea, for which the recommendation is for a zero total allowable catch; west of Scotland cod and whiting; and Irish sea whiting, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned.

The problem we have had with the landing obligation is that, although progress has been made, lots of species have been put on and the working groups have identified survivability exemptions and other approaches, the most difficult issues of all have been left till last, for understandable reasons. We are now confronted with those difficult decisions. There have been a number of problems with the roll-out of the landing obligation. First, the original plan was to have interspecies flexibility, so if someone ran out of quota for one stock, they could use another. In practice, that can be done only when species are within safe biological limits. Paradoxically, when people most need to use interspecies flexibility, they are least able to because of that requirement.

Secondly, although the working groups have made progress, not every member state is as enthusiastic about this approach as we are. We have not made as much progress as we would have liked. For instance, the UK argued that we should have cameras on boats. Other member states frustrated that, which has made it difficult to get reliable information about the discard uplift.

Finally, the discard uplift in the quotas for the species under the landing obligation has continued to be allocated along relative stability lines, and that has been a major problem for us. The discard uplift has not been allocated to the sections of the fleet that had the greatest problem with discards; it has been allocated along relative stability lines. As my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall pointed out, relative stability gives the UK a very unfair share of fishing opportunities, and means that the problem of choke species is particularly acute for some of our fleet.

The UK Government set out in our White Paper and the Bill a new approach to tackling the issue of the landing obligation and discards, with the idea of the creation of a national reserve of quota that would underpin a system in which we would charge a super-levy on over-quota stocks and fish that vessels would land. There would be the maximum possible financial disincentive on fishermen to avoid those stocks, but if they could not avoid them, there would be a means that allowed them to land that catch, subject to a levy.

In around March or April this year, we recognised that the working groups were not going to make sufficient progress in identifying solutions to the problem of choke. I met Commissioner Vella in July, and we set out some early proposals, and officials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs have been working with Commission officials ever since. The Commission has now proposed something akin to the British idea set out in our Bill. It calls it a “Union pool”, and it is similar to our national reserve idea. It is modelled along British thinking and will create a pool of quota that can be used to support a bycatch provision on problematic stocks, particularly those with zero TACs.

Mrs Murray: Will access to that pool be shared equally, or will it be on the lines of relative stability?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend will understand that that is a live discussion. Some countries believe that it should still be along the lines of relative stability. We do not believe it should be, since that compounds the problem.

The alternative solution is to put more stocks on what is called the prohibited list. People are not allowed to target or catch them, but if they accidently catch them, they can be discarded. For understandable reasons, the Commission is reluctant to do that. It would be preferable to find an alternative solution using bycatch provision.

I turn now to the points raised by other hon. Members. A number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Banff and Buchan (David Duguid) and the hon. Members for Strangford and for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), raised the issue of non-European economic area labour, which is important to crew some of these vessels. They will understand that that is an issue for the Home Office, so if they are talking to Home Office Ministers, they are talking to the right people. I undertake to talk to my ministerial colleagues in the Home Office again after this debate to see whether we can make some progress on this issue.
Brendan O’Hara: Will the Minister take from this debate our strength of feeling? When he speaks to his ministerial colleagues, will he advocate on behalf of those of us who desperately need this law changed?

George Eustice: As I said, I undertake to talk to my ministerial colleagues about that.

The hon. Member for Great Grimsby made the important point that, although we are leaving the European Union, we will still have annual fisheries negotiations with all our neighbours, just as Norway, Iceland and the Faroes do now. We will want to maintain good relations, and will rejoin the regional fisheries management organisations as an independent coastal state. I know that trade is very important for her constituency, but there is often a misunderstanding here. Although Iceland and Norway are in the EEA, the EEA agreement itself does not cover fisheries trade. Fisheries is outside the EEA trade agreement, but there are a number of separate preferential free trade agreements and what are called autonomous tariff rate quotas to allow tariff-free fish from Iceland and Norway, and even from the Barents sea and places such as Russia, to enter the UK. We are confident that we will be able to roll those preferential trade agreements forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) raised the important issue of bass. We have led the discussions on it for a number of years. Last year, we argued against the overly restrictive bycatch provision for trawlers, and for some provision for the recreational sector. We believe that the science has moved our way on that, and we will be arguing that again. The idea of an advisory committee is interesting. We already work with the Cornish Fish Producers Organisation, and we are looking at whether we can involve the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities in some of our thinking ahead of the December Council.

Finally, the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) raised the issue of the EU-Faroes deal. I can tell him that when we leave the EU, it will be a UK-Faroes deal, and we will not have the problem of British interests being traded away for other EU countries’ interests.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved
That this House has considered the UK fishing industry.

11 am

Zac Goldsmith (Richmond Park) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Government’s blue belt programme and the South Sandwich islands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. Oceans cover about 71% of the earth’s surface, and around 90% of the earth’s biosphere. They contain about a quarter of a million different known species—and likely vastly more, given that so little of our oceans has been properly explored or understood. Today, I will speak about the tragedy of what is happening to our oceans and about what we need to do to protect them.

There was a time when our oceans were absolutely brimming with life. In 1497, the explorer John Cabot complained that his ship’s progress had been hampered by the sheer volume of cod off the coast of Newfoundland. He wrote a message to his sponsor, King Henry VII, in which he said that his men “took so many fish that this kingdom will no longer have need of Iceland, from which country there is an immense trade in the fish”.

As we now know, industrial fishing quickly put an end to that. In 1968, the registered catch was 800,000 tonnes; by 1994, the catch was just 1,700 tonnes. In Victorian England, one could have seen large pods of orcas and blue whales off the coast of Cornwall. Professor Callum Roberts has reminded us that in 1836, a shoal of sardines extended, in a single compact body, from Fowey to Land’s End—a distance of around 100 miles. He notes that today, people pay serious money to travel thousands of miles to witness such scenes.

Today, we face an unprecedented loss of species in our oceans, comparable to the mass extinctions of past millennia. A year ago, the Zoological Society of London and the World Wide Fund for Nature issued a report stating that there is only half the amount of wildlife in the sea today as there was in 1970, just a few years before I was born. Between 70% and 80% of the world’s marine fish stocks have either been fully exploited, overexploited, depleted or are recovering from depletion. Of the 17 largest fisheries in the world, 15 are now so heavily depleted that future catches cannot be guaranteed.

A scientific paper published in Nature reports that we have lost 90% of the world’s big predatory fish, such as tunas and sharks. Only 5% of coral reefs are considered pristine. Despite serving as breeding grounds for 85% of commercial fish, a third of the world’s mangroves have been destroyed since 1990. That annihilation is happening across the world, and is not only an unforgettable biodiversity tragedy, but a human tragedy.

About 200 million people depend directly on the fishing industry for their livelihoods. For more than 1 billion people, fish is the primary source of protein. If the fishing industry collapses, the effects will be disastrous, especially for the world’s poorest people. One has only to look at what happened in Somalia a couple of decades ago: years of overfishing—mostly by vast foreign fleets—decimated the coastal economy when fish stocks ran out. Legal fishing gave way to piracy, and millions were plunged into poverty, with criminality taking over.
There are numerous causes of this loss and numerous things that we need to do to put things right, but the biggest—and the focus of the debate—is simply protection. Marine protected areas represent a broad spectrum, with everything from absolute no-take zones to areas open only to sustainable fishing. We know that they work because we can literally measure the results of protection.

When commercial fishing in the Atlantic ocean and North sea had to be stopped during world war two, there was an immediate spike in fish populations. In New Zealand’s Leigh marine reserve, common predatory fish are now six times more abundant in the reserve than outside, while in its Tāwharanui marine reserve, there are 60% more species in the reserve than out. Spain has suffered massively from overfishing, but catches close to the Tabarca marine reserve were 85% higher than elsewhere after just six years of protection. The list goes on, all around the world.

There is a level of agreement about the scale of the problem, but the response—an international commitment to protect 10% of the world’s oceans by 2020—is far below what is needed. To make matters much worse, we are nowhere near achieving that. The British Government get it: we have committed to pushing for the protection of 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030, and despite being a relatively small nation we are in a good position to get it: we have committed to pushing for the protection of 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030, and despite being a relatively small nation we are in a good position to take the lead. We are, after all, custodians of the fifth largest marine estate in the world, thanks to our extensive overseas territories, which contain, incidentally, over 94% of the UK’s unique biodiversity. They are scattered across the world and home to countless rare and threatened species.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): In the context of our overseas territories, Blue Belt is an incredibly ambitious policy. Does my hon. Friend agree that we will be judged on its success only in terms of how we support different marine protections around different archipelagos and islands? Ascension Island is a key one: people are waiting to see whether the Government are willing to pledge the means to ensure that the marine protection area there is a success, so that we can have confidence in what we are doing globally.

Zac Goldsmith: Of course, I hugely welcome that announcement. I will come to that in a few moments, but my speech will first canter through some of the overseas territories and some of the work that we are doing and need to do. The move that my hon. Friend referred to puts to rest a lot of the arguments against full protection, but I will come to that, and we will no doubt have an argument in due course.

I have described a great commitment of which we can be proud, but alone it is not enough. We need to make good on it, properly, and we need go further. Before I go into detail on the Blue Belt, I hope that the Minister will confirm that funding for the Blue Belt will be assured beyond 2020. It stands at £4.8 million per year and given what we get for that, it is spectacularly good value for money.

I want to look more broadly at the actual Blue Belt commitments. In some areas where we have made promises, we have delivered spectacularly. The Pitcairn islands in the Pacific ocean, for example, are surrounded by the most pristine marine environment anywhere on earth. It is just magnificent that the Government have permanently closed those waters, which cover around 840,000 square kilometres, to commercial fishing. It is one of the largest protected areas in the world.

Tristan da Cunha, a tiny island in the south Atlantic, has waters with vast populations of seals, southern right whales and blue sharks, as well as being home to great numbers of seabirds and rockhopper penguins. The Government have committed to protecting the full 750,000 sq km of Tristan’s waters by 2020. I hope that the Minister will confirm that we will make good on that commitment and that we will help the tiny local population by protecting the area from illegal fishing.

In 2016, the Government committed to a marine protected area of 450,000 sq km around St Helena in the south Atlantic ocean. It is an area bigger than Germany and has more than 40 endemic species, including whale sharks, turtles and humpback whales. The aspiration is to develop a sustainable one-by-one—one hook to catch one fish at a time—tuna fishery in its own marine protected area. At this stage, however, St Helena has yet to ban industrial long-lining from its waters. The Government clearly need to work with the local population to put that right, as a matter of urgency.
Ascension Island, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) mentioned, has 450,000 sq km of ocean and the second-largest green turtle breeding population in the Atlantic. It is a hotspot for sharks, tuna and swordfish. The Government are committed to protecting at least 50% of the area by 2019, but nothing stops them from going further and protecting the whole area. I understand that the island’s Council is itself minded to back 100% protection, but they are looking for assurances from the Government that they will not then be saddled with the costs of satellite monitoring for effective enforcement. They calculate, incidentally, that it would be cheaper to protect the whole area, rather than half, so that should not be a barrier. I hope that the Minister will address that point.

Viewers of the extraordinary “Blue Planet II” series will know that the greatest gift that the Government can give the oceans lies further south in, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray) has just referenced, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands. That is why the title of this debate names the area specifically. Those tiny, uninhabited islands are a near-pristine global biodiversity hotspot. A full quarter of the global population of penguins live here, alongside recovering populations of whales and seals, and unique marine habitats.

The local Government designated the whole 1 million sq km around the islands as an MPA in 2012. However, although the fisheries around South Georgia are without doubt managed to a high standard, until this morning only 2% of the total waters were fully protected. I understand from the news today that that area has been increased from 2% to 23%, which is fantastic news, but the remaining 77% is still technically open to fishing, and that could easily change. There is a huge groundswell of opinion among scientists, non-governmental organisations and colleagues in this House behind the campaign fully to protect the waters around the South Sandwich Islands in particular, which is about 500,000 sq km, roughly half of the whole MPA.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is most generous in giving way. The point he makes is that there has been no commercial fishing in this area for 25 years. However, there is no prospect that there will be in the next 25 years, so what he is proposing and campaigning for is tokenistic in the extreme. Will he not simply take this opportunity to welcome the fact that the Government have now protected the krill fisheries for an extra two months, banned HFO—heavy fuel oil—vessels from the area and taken a variety of other environmental steps to protect it in the way that he wants? Merely calling for more and more protection in a tokenistic and campaigning way achieves nothing but the alienation of local people.

Zac Goldsmith: To suggest that we should not protect an area because it has not yet been destroyed is madness; the same argument could equally have been used against much any area of the ocean. Frankly, nature reserves, including the national parks that are a source of pride in this country. The fact that the area has not been exploited and that an industry has not yet been able to develop there is precisely why it needs protection. Were a fishing industry to emerge and develop in that area, the prospect of removing it would become incomprehensible—vastly expensive, hugely disruptive and politically difficult—and so not happen. Because the area has not been fished and is pretty much pristine, it requires the protection for which the campaigners are rightly asking.

Politically, as I said, such a move would demonstrate the UK’s willingness to lead by example, but I would go further than that. If we are not willing to protect that pristine, unfished, global biodiversity gem, how could anyone take seriously our commitment to support the protection of 30% of the world’s oceans? One cannot be achieved without committing to the other. Despite great leadership on that issue, the Foreign Office seems to have hit the buffers somewhat. Those involved, on the inside and on the outside, are, frankly, scratching their heads. Whatever the block, I strongly urge Ministers to be decisive, to be bold and just to get on with it.

11.15 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I am genuinely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith) for securing this debate. As a member of the Environmental Audit Committee and a well-regarded champion of the recent illegal wildlife trade conference, he takes a close interest in conservation and the environment.

The UK has long understood that, as custodians of the world’s fifth largest marine estate, we and our overseas territories have a responsibility—indeed, a duty—to manage and protect our marine environment. The general public are increasingly aware of the importance of caring for our oceans, in many cases thanks to last year’s excellent “Blue Planet II” series, and understandably they are demanding action. I am therefore grateful for this opportunity to update the House on developments in respect of the South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands marine protected area and on wider progress on the Blue Belt initiative.

This morning, I was delighted to welcome the announcement by the Commissioner for South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands of a suite of environmental enhancements, including additional marine protected area measures. The announced protections are based on the recommendations of the first five-year review of the
territory’s MPA, which has recently concluded. That review was conducted by a panel which included scientists, as well as representatives from the fishing and tourism industries, and environmental groups. The panel’s conclusions were made public on 7 November. It found that the current MPA is achieving its objectives, while also making a series of recommendations further to strengthen protection of the territory’s waters.

Based on those recommendations and other recent scientific work, the Commissioner today announced an expansion of the MPA to cover the territory’s entire maritime zone; an extension of the seasonal closure of the krill fishery, to provide further protection for breeding wildlife; an increase of the marine areas fully closed to commercial fishing activities, to up to 23% of the maritime zone; and the banning of all commercial mineral resource extraction activities, along with prohibitions on the transport of heavy fuel oil, in line with the restrictions that apply in Antarctic waters. The measures are based on precautionary scientific advice and take into account the UK’s rights and responsibilities under the convention for the conservation of Antarctic marine living resources, known as CCAMLR. Taken together, the measures will help to ensure that the UK’s stewardship of the islands remains exemplary.

We welcome the engagement that we have had over the past year with many who have an interest in South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, in particular those environmental organisations, including WWF—the World Wide Fund for Nature—and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, which have supported scientific work in the territory. We do, however, recognise that some may continue to press us to go further.

As I explained to the House in a similar debate at about this time last year, although on the face of it a simple proposal to close much of that area to all commercial fishing might seem to be a complete no-brainer—not least because there has been no intensive commercial fishing around the South Sandwich Islands for more than 25 years—a variety of scientific and diplomatic factors are in play, all of which need to be considered carefully. Furthermore, the recent MPA review did not reach consensus on whether a full no-take marine reserve around the South Sandwich Islands would deliver any conservation benefits.

Of course, the commissioner’s announcement today is not the end of the story. South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands continue to change dramatically as a result of regional climate change. In partnership with the commissioner’s team and the Government’s Blue Belt programme, scientists will undertake further studies in the new year.

Zac Goldsmith: The Minister mentioned the diplomatic barriers that still exist. I wonder whether he will elaborate on that. In the light of today’s news about the protection of up to 23% of the area, it seems that the arguments against full protection—displacement activity, dealing with neighbouring states and so on—are exactly the same as those against protecting 23%. Will he elaborate on what those barriers are?

Sir Alan Duncan: No, I think they become more complicated. I ask my hon. Friend to appreciate that we genuinely would do absolutely everything we could, but we have to look at the diplomatic consequences of sovereignty claims, or whatever one calls them, which complicate doing straightforward things unilaterally. I will say a little more about that in the context of CCAMLR in a second.

To continue what I was saying about the Blue Belt programme, that work will further inform the management of what is a unique and precious territory, as well as contributing to an international krill survey project to gather data to inform international discussions about the future distribution of the krill fishery at CCAMLR.

Richard Benyon: Will the Minister give way?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, although I am about to answer my right hon. Friend’s point about Ascension.

Richard Benyon: I am very grateful. Will the Minister give me an assurance that he will push back at scientists to ensure that they embrace the latest scientific understanding of the power of krill to sequester carbon? That may require them to change their modelling. A really high biomass of krill has a fantastic ability to lock up carbon on the seabed. I hope he pushes scientific advisers to ensure that they understand and embrace that emerging scientific understanding.

Sir Alan Duncan: I think I know what I am in the Foreign Office for challenging officials very robustly, and on the issue of science I undertake to do exactly that. There is no point in using old science if there is newer, better-informed science available. We really want to set the highest possible scientific standards. In return, I hope that my right hon. Friend accepts that where there is a scientific conclusion, that is what should guide us.

I would like to take this opportunity briefly to update the House on other recent progress through the wider Blue Belt programme. As many colleagues who take a close interest in the programme will be aware, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park said, the UK has to date declared marine protected areas across around 3 million sq km—more than 40%—of British waters. I am pleased to confirm that we remain on course to increase that to 4 million sq km, or around 60% of our waters, by 2020. I hope the House agrees that that will be a remarkable achievement.

As for South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, designation of protected areas is not the end of the story. Our overseas territories are working closely with our two main Blue Belt delivery partners—the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science and the Marine Management Organisation—to ensure that each marine protection regime is well designed, well managed, monitored and enforced.

Members may have seen the Blue Belt programme annual update for 2017-18, copies of which were placed in the Libraries of both Houses in July. I will highlight a couple of examples of work that demonstrate the UK’s commitment to the marine protection of our overseas territories. First, the Government’s National Maritime Information Centre provides technical support to monitor and enforce protected areas around our territories, which in turn supports the global fight against illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing. Secondly, a number of scientific expeditions have been undertaken around the overseas
territories to assess biodiversity. That is crucial to ensure that we protect the right areas and the most vulnerable species or habitats.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon) asked about Ascension. A commitment was made in 2016 to designate a no-take MPA across half of Ascension’s waters, and considerable work has been undertaken in the territory to identify the best location for the MPA based on robust scientific understanding of those waters. It is for the Ascension Island Government to consider the options for an MPA based on the evidence available, and they are currently undertaking a consultation on a range of options, one of which may include designating Ascension as an entire maritime area. In respect of Tristan da Cunha, I can confirm that it is committed to designating marine measures across its maritime zone by 2020. We should all be pleased that so many parliamentary colleagues have recognised and engaged with the ambitious policy direction we have set through the Blue Belt programme.

Zac Goldsmith: I am trying to resist intervening too much, but before we move on from Ascension, my understanding is that the Island Council is willing to go for 100% protection but is looking for some kind of assurance from the British Government that it will not be lumbered with the costs. Has my right hon. Friend looked at that, and is he willing to give that assurance?

Sir Alan Duncan: I cannot give my hon. Friend an absolutely clear answer, because I have not engaged with Ascension on the issue of costs nor, as a Foreign Office Minister, can I make the sort of funding promises he asked for a moment ago. However, I undertake to look into that and to consult him personally to see whether the issue of costs can be properly addressed and understood in order to introduce the maximum possible certainty to reach the objectives we all share.

The announcement today by the Commissioner for South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands is further testament to our commitment to ensuring that the UK remains a world leader on marine protection. Simply banning all fishing activity might seem a simple and obvious conservation solution, but I ask the House to appreciate that the reality is a bit more complicated. The Government will continue to work on the basis of science and evidence to deliver tangible marine protection to contribute to the health of the global ocean, while also taking into account the specific circumstances and needs of each of our overseas territories. I hope that all of us in the House from all parties can work together to do our best for the marine environment.

Question put and agreed to.

11.27 am

Sitting suspended.

2.30 pm

Faisal Rashid (Warrington South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered NHS reorganisation.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. It is my pleasure to open this debate on our NHS, as we near the end of the year marking its 70th birthday. In debating its reorganisation, we should not lose sight of what a great credit the NHS and its staff are to our country. Its foundation represents arguably the greatest achievement of this House. It is for precisely that reason that its reorganisation matters so greatly.

Let me set the context. Eight years of cuts and the biggest financial squeeze in its history have pushed the NHS to the brink. On all key performance measures, it is struggling to keep up with demand—A&E performance hit a record low this year, more than 4 million people are stuck on a waiting list, and cancer targets are repeatedly missed. In a speech last year, the chief executive of NHS England warned:

“On the current funding outlook, the NHS waiting list will rise to 5 million people by 2021. That is an extra 1 million people on the waiting list. One in 10 of us waiting for an operation.”

As the NHS is pressurised to do more with less, it is imperative that Parliament properly scrutinises the ongoing process of its reorganisation. We should not allow the Government’s shambolic handling of the Brexit negotiations to distract us from reforms that are critical to the livelihoods of millions in this country.

I acknowledge that this subject is wide-ranging and complex, so I intend to focus on a few key issues: clinical commissioning groups; sustainability and transformation plans and partnerships; integrated care partnerships; health and social care integration; and healthcare infrastructure.

Let me start with the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and CCGs. Six years on from the coalition Government’s top-down reorganisation of the NHS, it is clear that that initiative has been as much of a disaster as Labour warned it would be. My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) rightly described those reforms as having put in place “a siloed, market-based approach that created statutory barriers to integration.”—[Official Report, 6 September 2018; Vol. 646, c. 176WH.]

The 2012 Act removed regional health planning by abolishing strategic health authorities and creating a complex and fragmented system of clinical commissioning groups. Strategic health authorities helped co-ordinate the provision of healthcare across an area. Subsequent NHS reorganisations have often felt like partial attempts to reverse the damage done by the 2012 Act. It is therefore unsurprising that little effort has been made to keep the public informed of those changes.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. He touches on the reorganisation way back in 2012. Clinical commissioning groups were created, but they are not accountable to the public—we have problems trying to find out what their budgets are and so forth. We have the same problem with NHS England, which is another
very difficult organisation to deal with. As a result of all this reorganisation, we have organisations that are not really accountable to the public, and the public do not get their voices heard.

My hon. Friend touched on staff salaries. If we worked it out, we would probably find that they have had a 8% real-terms cut in wages over the past seven or eight years, on top of which they have to pay car parking charges for the privilege of serving the public. Does he agree that that cannot be right?

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. Can I just request that interventions are not long speeches?

Faisal Rashid: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I totally agree with him, and I will come to that point later.

The Health Secretary has not even put out a press release about his most recent set of NHS reforms. I wonder when that will happen. Despite not being locally accountable, CCGs hold more public money than local authorities. That lack of accountability is particularly concerning given the large sums CCGs handle and the potential for vested interests to benefit in ways that do not best serve local populations. For example, although GPs acting as both commissioners and providers of care are allowed to sit on local NHS boards, elected and accountable local officials are not. It is alarming that current arrangements allow for such potentially significant conflicts of interest while resisting local democratic oversight.

I turn to sustainability and transformation partnerships. Since the 2012 Act, we have seen the launch of 44 STPs, covering all aspects of NHS spending in England. That process has been characterised by Government secrecy, with little or no engagement with staff, patients, unions or the public before the publication of plans. Despite being asked by the Government to deliver changes to local health services, STPs were given no statutory status, and their meetings are held in private. In the majority of cases, councils have not been included at all, and a number have passed motions or issued statements condemning the process. Under this Government, changes have been initiated with no proper consultation or engagement locally with the public, patients or staff. Without accountability to local democracy, we cannot ensure that health and care systems are relevant to the people and places they are intended to serve.

STPs’ lack of accountability is even more significant given their role in administering spending reductions. Analysis by the Nuffield Trust found that some STPs are targeting up to 30% reductions in areas of hospital activity, including out-patient care. A&E attendances and emergency in-patient care, over the next four years. Those reductions are being planned in the face of steady growth in all areas of hospital activity. Too often, such initiatives encourage short-term savings, to the long-term detriment and overall cost of the NHS.

We should not forget that hard-working frontline staff bear the brunt of these pressures. It is sadly unsurprising that hospitals report growing shortages of doctors, nurses, midwives and therapists, while these bureaucratic bodies flourish.

Mr Jim Cunningham: My hon. Friend is quite right. One of the things that would help, particularly among women, is reintroducing the education maintenance allowance so we can bring forward student nurses and so forth. I will give a very quick example—I know you have been a bit lenient. Mr Gapes. In Coventry, a certain facility is starting to be moved to Birmingham. That is 16 miles away, so people are going to have to travel quite a distance. We still have difficulties getting through to NHS England, which arbitrarily comes along and says, “This is going to happen.” It looks as though it might happen unless we can find some alternative. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is no way to run a national health service?

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that they should not make lengthy speeches in interventions. I would be grateful if all Members bear that in mind in future. I will not be very kind if I get the sense that we are getting three or four speeches from one Member.

Faisal Rashid: Thank you, Mr Gapes. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I agree with him to some extent, but I think his microphone was not working, and it was very difficult to hear what he was saying. That needs to be looked at.

The Warrington and Cheshire STP is completely unworkable. It has the second largest footprint of the 44 STPs, covering 2.5 million people, 12 CCGs and 20 NHS provider organisations. There are so many bodies involved that the STP has been almost impossible to co-ordinate. It required £755 million in capital funding to be deliverable. Against a backdrop of cuts to NHS capital budgets it is unsurprising that the STP has made little progress.

Integrated care providers represent the latest iteration of the changes. Although ICPs could drastically change health and social care provision if adopted, their implementation is taking place without a vote or a debate. The details setting out what an ICP will do were published during the summer recess, with very little publicity. An ICP can be awarded a contract to deliver a general practice for up to 10 years. Significantly, these contracts can also be awarded to private companies. One of the criteria used to assess bids will be “whether they are able to deliver value for money,” moving away from an emphasis on quality and choice. Does the Minister believe that these changes should be made without parliamentary consent?

Mr Gapes, forgive me for using these confusing and seemingly never-ending abbreviations. The communication of the changes has been another major flaw in the process. Indeed, I echo the criticisms in the seventh report of the Health and Social Care Committee, published earlier this year, which noted: “Understanding of these changes has been hampered by poor communication and a confusing acronym spaghetti of changing titles and terminology, poorly understood even by those working within the system. This has fuelled a climate of suspicion about the underlying purpose of the proposals and missed opportunities to build goodwill for the co-design of local systems that would work more effectively in the best interests of those who depend on services.”

This unnecessary use of abbreviations and complex terminology has shut out the public and excluded them from the debate over the future of the NHS. The Government
have a clear a responsibility to make the debate around NHS reorganisation far more accountable and accessible to the public.

Moving on to health and social care integration, there is broad consensus that if the NHS is to maintain levels of service provision while making the efficiency gains demanded of it, the integration of services across health and social care is vital. Demands on the NHS are becoming increasingly complex, and long-term integrated care has the potential to transform the lives of millions of patients, as well as improving the patient experience. It has huge potential to save money by cutting down on costly emergency hospital admissions and delayed discharges. However, a recent report on health and social care funding by the Institute of Fiscal Studies revealed:

“Social care is facing high growth in demand pressures, which are projected to rise by around £18 billion by 2033-34, at an annual rate of 3.9%.”

This is not something that can be done on the cheap.

For patients, the lack of integration of health and social care can be a maddening experience. I am sure many Members have heard complaints from constituents about having to constantly repeat their story to any number of different health and social care professionals. In my constituency, a community-led healthcare non-governmental organisation passed on the following patient comment, which sums up the problem well:

“When I get on a plane, there is a lounge, passport control, security, air traffic controllers—lots of separate organisations. But what I experience is a trip from A to B. In health and social care what most people experience is A to Z, B to Z etc. having to repeat their stories each time.”

This confusion is the outcome to be expected from the unnecessary complexity and fragmentation that has characterised NHS reorganisation for several years. The fear is that the next NHS reorganisation will not take into account or optimise the 80% of individuals’ wellbeing impacted by the wider determinants of health—housing, employment and connectedness to the local community.

In my constituency, Warrington Together offers a potential way forward as a locally appropriate, collaborative model of care. Its rationale is a return to the principles of the NHS when it was established in 1948: a single taxpayer-funded organisation working to a single integrated plan; promoting healthy lifestyles; utilising doctors and hospitals, as well as community care, social care and mental healthcare; and striving to keep an entire population well in the most efficient way possible, with enhanced stewardship by those who are locally democratically elected.

Warrington Together offers the opportunity to stimulate a social movement to ensure that changes to healthcare are more accountable to the local population. It has established a third sector health and social care alliance, which is an umbrella group made up of 12 local voluntary health and care providers, who can act with one voice and be contracted as a single entity. That will enable a broad range of providers to come together, offering such diverse care as housing and home repairs, mental health support, and links to local leisure and cultural opportunities. While that is not without its challenges, it represents something we should try to achieve on a national scale: involving local stakeholders to provide integrated health and social care services.

My last topic is healthcare infrastructure. NHS reorganisations need to be informed by infrastructure needs. Buildings need to be more efficient and cost-effective. It is estimated that one third of GP surgeries are conversions of former Victorian terraces, 1960s bungalows or former offices. They are often unfit for purpose and cause significant waste. Innovative and modern infrastructure helps to reduce energy and utilities costs to our NHS, while also protecting our environment. The less money we spend on the maintenance of outdated NHS infrastructure, the more money we can spend on long-term care.

I have a number of questions for the Minister to answer. How can he justify the creation of ICPs without a parliamentary vote or debate? Does he acknowledge that ICPs are moving away from an emphasis on quality and choice by allowing bids to be assessed based on whether they are able to deliver value for money? How can he explain the Government’s decision to keep accountable, elected local officials out of the NHS’s decision-making process? Without accountability to local democracy, how can he ensure that health and social care systems are relevant to the people and places they are intended to serve? Will he now acknowledge that the Health and Social Care Act 2012 has been a disaster for the NHS, creating a fragmented and overcomplicated system that fails to meet patients’ needs?

The 2012 reforms have been likened by one commentator to “a football team reorganised in such a way that the defenders, midfielders and forwards have to contract formally with one another for a certain number of tackles, saves, passes and goals, according to a general plan laid out by the manager, even though all the money comes from the same source: the club, and ultimately the fans. To make things more complicated, on match days, fans are encouraged to swap their tickets for another game, at another stadium, with other teams.”

Is that not an effective summary of these reforms? Finally, does the Minister agree that the unnecessary use of abbreviations and complex terminology has functioned to shut out the public and exclude them from the debate over the future of the NHS?

2.51 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes; I love saying that, particularly to our current Chair. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid) for securing this important debate.

I am here today to put on record the wild west of the NHS in south-west London, which will be well known to the Minister. It is a branch of the NHS that has spent the past two decades desperately trying to close the A&E and maternity unit at St Helier hospital on the border of my constituency and move those services to leafy, wealthy Belmont in Sutton. I will describe the geography for any hon. Members unfamiliar with my constituency. St Helier hospital is based in the deprived area of Rose Hill. Further south is the Royal Marsden in the wealthy area of Belmont, and seven miles west is Epsom hospital. The local CCGs are proposing to move all their acute services to just one of those sites.

This is about accountability. Over the past 20 years a staggering £50 million has been wasted on almost identical consultations to reach the obvious conclusion: acute health services must be placed in the area where people
are most deprived and most in need, and have the greatest health issues. They must be placed at St Helier hospital’s current site. It does not matter how many brands or names the local NHS gives these proposals or how many marketing consultants are hired. Moving these health services would be catastrophic for my constituents, and catastrophic for south-west London.

What my local NHS fails to consider is this: if St Helier hospital loses acute services, my constituents will not turn to Belmont. The Minister will know Lavender, Cricket Green, Figgies Marsh and Mitcham town centre. They will turn north to St George’s or east to Croydon, both hospitals that are already under extraordinary pressure. I told the Prime Minister only today of the case of my constituent who had to queue outside St George’s hospital last Monday because the A&E was simply full. Two weeks ago, St George’s was on black alert. It had no beds. The managers had to cancel all meetings and walk around wards, attempting to get people discharged. Those pressures exist even before the winter bad weather starts and before the flu epidemic that we are anticipating.

I could not possibly have emphasised any more strongly to my local NHS that its statistics and suggestions that people will move from London and parts of my constituency to Belmont are simply not going to happen. In all the years I have been fighting this, nobody in the NHS has ever said anything publicly to support my view, until the week before last. I could not believe it when the chair of St George’s NHS trust wrote a letter, simply full. Two weeks ago, St George’s was on black alert. It had no beds. The managers had to cancel all meetings and walk around wards, attempting to get people discharged. Those pressures exist even before the winter bad weather starts and before the flu epidemic that we are anticipating.

I told the Prime Minister only today of the case of my constituent who had to queue outside St George’s hospital last Monday because the A&E was simply full. Two weeks ago, St George’s was on black alert. It had no beds. The managers had to cancel all meetings and walk around wards, attempting to get people discharged. Those pressures exist even before the winter bad weather starts and before the flu epidemic that we are anticipating.

I could not possibly have emphasised any more strongly to my local NHS that its statistics and suggestions that people will move from London and parts of my constituency to Belmont are simply not going to happen. In all the years I have been fighting this, nobody in the NHS has ever said anything publicly to support my view, until the week before last. I could not believe it when the chair of St George’s NHS trust wrote a letter that argued:

“There is no formal requirement to take account of the impact” of its proposals on other providers.

Let me make this clear. Moving acute hospital services from St Helier to Sutton could bring St George’s hospital to the point of collapse, yet those consulting on these proposals were not even taking the inevitable impact on other hospitals into account. Is there a code of guidance on consultation in the NHS? It does not seem that people in south-west London have read it. Take last year, when the same consultation was run, this time by the hospital trust itself, and was called “public engagement”. To the public, the trust portrays a neutral stance and says a suitable site will be selected across south-west London for its services. To the stakeholders in Sutton, it confesses its desire to move the services to their wealthy area. To me, it pretends that the consultation will genuinely seek the views of the public, before it happens to ignore the fact that the consultation receives six times as many negative responses as positive ones.

I was not surprised, given that—this is hard to believe—Epsom and St Helier University Hospitals Trust delivered the consultation document to most parts of Sutton and most parts of Epsom, but not a single street in my constituency; and that is called a consultation. I ask the Minister whether he thinks it is appropriate for an NHS body to run a consultation or an engagement and simply exclude part of the catchment area. Better to deliver no leaflets at all than not to include everybody.

Fast-forward to the latest attempt, where flawed consultation documents are created so that boxes can be ticked and the process can move along more and more quickly. The latest versions argue that Belmont is the deprived area locally, but, staggeringly, the same documents suggest that Pollards Hill is outside the catchment area for the Epsom and St Helier trust. Something that will come as news to Wide Way, the largest GP surgery in Pollards Hill, which sends 35% of its patients to St Helier hospital. The trust claims to be neutral about sites, but when I secured £267 million from the Department of Health and the Treasury under both the Labour Government and the coalition Government to rebuild St Helier, guess what happened? The local NHS sent the money back; it did not want to use it.

It seems that every step forward comes up with a new consultation involving closed meetings that unswervingly fails to take account of health inequalities, which I understand is a legal requirement for the NHS. The trust ignores access to the site, public transport and percentage of car ownership, and we make no progress. For me, the last 20 years as the MP for Mitcham and Morden has been like being in the film “Groundhog Day”. Every month there is something, and we can absolutely rely on the fact that every July some bit of the south-west London NHS will want to come up with a consultation to move acute services from St Helier hospital. I simply want to put a stop to it. I want the staff at St Helier to know they have a future, and I want my constituents not to be worried about how they will access an A&E.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). The Minister will not be able to answer all my questions because, as everyone knows, health is devolved to Northern Ireland. However, I will illustrate the issues with NHS reorganisation with some stories from the Province. The Minister has a close parliamentary aide from Northern Ireland, so he knows a wee bit about Northern Ireland.

I thank the House of Commons Library for the help it always gives us. Sometimes its information is enormously helpful, and today is one of those days. I have listened with great interest to the contributions so far; it is clear that, no matter the make-up of the constituency—whether Strangford in Northern Ireland, Mitcham and Morden, Warrington South or constituencies in Glasgow, Cardiff or wherever—there are issues. The NHS is struggling UK-wide, and either the pressure goes or its ability to treat will go. We are caught between those two.

I welcome the Government’s commitment to spending £20 billion extra on the NHS, which is a credit to them. My constituency is on the seaside, and lots of people head that way to retire; I suspect things are the same in many constituencies. Our elderly population is growing, and the future demand on healthcare will be enormous. That is why the £20 billion that the Government have set aside is so helpful—because it gives a golden opportunity to plan ahead. The hon. Member for Warrington South was clear about where that should go.

The Library briefing—I am sure that the Minister has had chance to read it; I know that other Members have—contains six simple lessons from the Nuffield Trust, which are very helpful.

“Lesson 1: Avoid the temptations of a grand plan.”
This refers to the complex and heterogeneous nature of healthcare. We all know that it is complex; that is the very nature of healthcare. There are no one-size-fits-all policies that can address the issues. There has to be more than that.

“Lesson 2: Listen to the public—and don’t pretend you will if you won’t”.

As elected representatives, we know how these things work. When constituents come to us and tell us a problem, we listen intently and respond accordingly. This debate will hopefully be an occasion when we can do just that.

“Lesson 3: Don’t treat the workforce as an afterthought”.

It is very important that the workforce are part of a focused reorganisation plan. With the input of the workforce, there is a way forward.

“Lesson 4: Make sure the funding follows the plan”.

If funding commitments are made, they should be in there.

“Lesson 5: Don’t overrate structural reorganisation”.

In other words, it will not be sufficient to add more to the system that is operating on its own without building that structure up.

“Lesson 6: You need a plan your staff can follow”.

Create a policy and strategy that staff can get behind and support. The best way of doing that is to make sure that staff are involved in the creation of the plan, with staff values reflected in targets. All those things are vastly important, and I know that the Minister, who is a compassionate man and understands the issues well, will be able to respond even to the very generic terms that I put that in.

For Hansard and for the record, I will highlight an issue that I know is important across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: GP out-of-hours services. I emphasise the importance of that service, but we have particular problems with it in my constituency of Strangford. Part of any strategy or plan for NHS reorganisation should look at that.

My local health board is the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust—clearly, not the responsibility of the Minister—which covers my entire constituency. On selected days just last month, the GP out-of-hours service in the main town in my constituency, Newtownards, had to close because it was understaffed, and there are particular reasons for that. People could either follow the advice and go to the nearest South Eastern Trust facility in Downpatrick, some 40 minutes away from Ards—for those who dare to live in Portavogie in the Ards peninsula, not that far from me, it is an hour and 20 minutes—or they could go to the A&E department, which was standing room only. The choice puts massive undue burden on an already drowning service.

I suggest to the Minister—as I have suggested at home; I think it would be helpful—that, whenever GPs commit themselves to operating an out-of-hours service, there may need to be another method of addressing the issues of those who use the service. For instance, why not have a staff nurse to treat minor ailments, taking pressure off the GPs? There are ways of doing things. There does not always have to be a GP there. GPs are predominantly overburdened; they certainly are in my constituency, and I suspect they are everywhere else as well.

I will give the example of my parliamentary aide from just last week, which I believe, unfortunately, is the tip of the iceberg. Her daughter, who has just turned three, is treated in an asthma clinic. She had an extremely high temperature that would not come down to the normal range and which had been going on for nearly two weeks. Her little body fought so hard to control the infection that it was going through that her breathing rate was double what it should have been. The out-of-hours service was rung, and four hours later the call was returned—a long time when the mother and family are getting panicky. The child was lifted out of sleep and brought to a waiting room full of other children who were equally unwell.

Had the service not been able to sound out her lungs, she would have had to travel to the Ulster Hospital, which she ultimately had to do the following week, as her ear infection burst an ear drum. Unfortunately, she is one of many. My aide met doctors who were harassed—not because they were nasty people, but because of their workload—but doing the best they could. When she asked whether there is insufficient funding to pay for out-of-hours care she was told that there is insufficient desire. How do we inspire doctors to be part of the out-of-hours service, which can only function with GPs who want to be part of it?

The new remuneration system came into operation in Northern Ireland in 2003. Although the system was designed to give GP practices much more flexibility on how they deliver services, allowing them to choose how to organise patient care and rewarding them for the quality of that care, the introduction of the new general medical services contract also allowed GPs to opt out of providing out-of-hours services, leaving the system essentially on its knees.

The fact is that the A&E in the Ulster Hospital in Dundonald simply cannot cope without the service. The fact is that nursing homes that rely on GPs coming out to drivers into patients who are in agony and pain, or to call time of death, need the service, as do parents who need someone to sound out the chest of their asthmatic child without being subjected to a four-hour wait in a room with ill, injured and drunk people in the middle of a cold winter’s night.

The service is vital. I read a report in July this year that referred to Wales as having similar circumstances and similar difficulties with their GP service. I am interested to know whether the shadow Minister or the Minister are aware of similar circumstances across the UK mainland. I suspect any MP in touch with their constituents, as we all are, will be able to replicate the stories that I am telling.

I very much respect GPs and the hard work that they do and their right to a social life. No longer do we expect the village doctor to be on call every day and night, but we need them to be available. There are no longer enforceable contracts, and I believe that, in any new NHS reorganisation or strategy, we must find another way of operating the out-of-hours service that gives the care that our constituents want at the times that they need it, which is usually out-of-hours or whenever they are under pressure.

I spoke very recently to a recently retired GP. He had been doing the night shift four nights a week, but realised that that was too much and pulled out. Perhaps if he had been asked to do only one or two nights, he
would have stayed. Too much has been asked of too few people. We need to ensure that funding and people are available.

I know he will be mortified, but I am going to name one local GP, because he is a very popular and well liked GP in my constituency. Dr Doyle has his own practice and can be found a lot more than is right, and than is probably his duty, in the out-of-hours surgery. He makes time to help his patients by writing support letters for personal independence payment and employment and support allowance applications and he genuinely cares. I am not saying that others do not care; I am picking out this man as a representative of what happens. I look at Dr Doyle and wonder how much longer he and others like him can possibly continue. We need to spread the burden through the area.

I would urge the Health and Social Care Committee here to look at what is happening with the out-of-hours service, see the good that it does and perhaps look at a different way in which the out-of-hours provision could work. The Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs, on which I serve as one of the members from my party, is doing inquiries into many things, and one of them is health. People from Northern Ireland with a knowledge of and interest in health are coming here to make presentations to the Committee. And one thing that crops up is the out-of-hours service.

The question is how we adjust to the demands on the health service for the future. I started my comments by saying how much I genuinely welcome the £20 billion that the Government have set aside. We will get some of that through the Barnett consequential, so we are very pleased, but I see the needs in my constituency among the elderly population. I am also very keen that there should be early diagnosis and that preventive steps should be taken in delivering a health service for the future. If we do that, we will be doing the right thing. We must not just react all the time. Let us have a strategy that looks forward and aims to prevent things happening.

I am a type 2 diabetic, and many in the House are, as it turns out. Our Prime Minister is a type 1 diabetic. We all live with our particular ailments. But how much better would it have been if I had known about my condition earlier. I suspect that I was a diabetic for perhaps a year before I was diagnosed as one. I did not know at the time what the issue was. It was only when I went for a check-up with a doctor that I suddenly realised when he told me what was wrong. That makes me wonder whether there are steps that we can take for education, awareness and prevention. That is what we should be doing.

The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee will come to a conclusion in our inquiry on the health service in Northern Ireland, but I will conclude my speech today with this point for the Minister. The problems that I have referred to are specific in some cases to Northern Ireland and to my constituency. In particular, but I believe that problems exist UK-wide and therefore that the response must be UK-wide as well.

Mike Gapes (in the Chair): Order. I think that there will be a vote imminently. If so, we will break for 15 minutes and get back as quickly as possible.

Justin Madders: Before we were interrupted by important business in the Chamber, I was referring to contributions from other hon. Members. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) gave his perspective from Northern Ireland, and set out clearly what a proper consultation should look like—a standard that, as we have heard, is not really being reached by the NHS at the moment. He also...
raised issues with the GP out-of-hours service. That is slightly beyond the scope of the debate, but he is right to say that the issue covers the whole United Kingdom. Indeed, there have been numerous newspaper reports about people having to wait for many weeks to get a GP appointment.

Looking at current NHS performance, it is clear that, on all key performance measures, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South said, the NHS is struggling to keep up with demand. A&E performance is at a record low this year. More than 4 million people are stuck on waiting lists, and cancer targets are being repeatedly missed. This has led to the Government effectively giving up on trying to meet the NHS’s constitutional targets. As my hon. Friend said earlier, waiting lists for operations are likely to hit 5 million people within the next three years. While the eight years of a financial plan that has failed to keep up with demand have clearly been a driver of that failure, it is also clear that the 2012 top-down reorganisation has exacerbated the issues that the NHS faces.

We have been left with a fragmented, marketised system, which prevents the kind of transformation and integration of services that we would all like to see. At a time when everyone is calling for various parts of the health and social care sector to work together, we remain bound by legislation. As my hon. Friend said, it is this legislation that enforces a siloed, market-based approach, which imposes statutory barriers to integration.

Against this backdrop we have seen a whole series of acronyms encapsulating a range of reorganisations to health services, including STPs, ACOs, ACSs, ICPs, ICSs and so on—all part of what the Health and Social Care Committee has described as a culture of “changing titles and terminology, poorly understood even by those working within the system.”

It is all clearly an attempt by NHS leadership to reverse the impact of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 by any means that do not require primary legislation or parliamentary oversight. These reforms could have wide-ranging impacts, from causing walk-in centres, cottage hospitals, maternity centres and A&Es to relocate or close altogether, to introducing a new form of 10-year contract, which raises the spectre of private companies once again running our local health services.

I know the Government are not particularly fond at the moment of testing the will of the House, but something as fundamental as transforming our most treasured asset clearly should not be taking place without parliamentary consent. Ministers and NHS leaders are tiptoeing around the 2012 Act, but if we are to have meaningful proposals and an effective integration process, we need an admission that that legislation has had its day. To all intents and purposes, the 2012 Act is no more; it has expired and gone to meet its maker. Yet the Government refuse to acknowledge that central fact.

The initial STP process was imposed from the top and was based around 44 geographical areas that were determined very quickly without recourse to the public. Although some of the areas that emerged after that initial consideration had well-established networks of co-operation, in others a vast and unwieldy network of commissioners and providers with completely different approaches was put together at very short notice. The only beneficiaries of that process seem to be the private consultants who were drafted in to complete these hastily arranged plans. Professor Chris Ham has pointed out that “most STPs got to the finishing line of October 2016, submitted their plans and breathed a huge sigh of relief. No further work has been done on those STPs.”

Despite the fact that plans were designed to cover the period from October 2016 to March 2021, NHS England and NHS Improvement said in a letter to local leaders last month that sustainability and transformation partnerships and integrated care systems will be expected to develop and agree their plans during the first half of 2019-20. Will the Minister update us as to how many of the 44 STPs developed as part of this process have, as NHS Providers puts it, had no further work done? What was the cost of developing those plans? Can the Minister justify forcing the entire health and social care sector to stop what it was doing and embark again on a hasty and expensive process to come up with new five-year plans, only to be asked to do the same again a few years later? In the few local areas that have proceeded to the next stages of integration, there is understandable concern among patients and staff about precisely what that will mean.

The accountable care organisation—now rebranded as integrated care provider—process has the potential to radically alter the entire health and social care landscape, but, again, it is continuing without any parliamentary legislation. One of the primary concerns about that new model is that it would be compulsory to advertise the contracts to the market, and commissioners are forbidden from discriminating between NHS and non-NHS bidders. Bids can be made by a group of organisations, so an NHS trust or a group of GPs could partner with a private company. Previous high-profile attempts to do this kind of thing in Staffordshire and Cambridge collapsed spectacularly with millions of pounds wasted. As my hon. Friend said, it is also deeply worrying that one of the criteria used to assess bids will be whether they are able to deliver value for money. That marks a significant change to the status quo, and one that I do not believe should be countenanced without new legislation.

I have heard Ministers speak on several occasions to assure those of us who have concerns that this will not see mass privatisation. However, during the debate on integration in September, the previous Health Minister, now the latest Brexit Secretary, was asked four times by Conservative, Scottish National party and Labour Members to expressly rule out new organisations being run by the private sector. He failed to do so on every occasion he was asked. Is the Minister now prepared to give that kind of assurance, and if not, why not?

It is also less clear what will happen in the event that an ICP ends up in deficit, particularly if a private sector organisation or a charity has won the contract. While the consultation document sets out that efforts will be made to ensure that ICPs are financially viable, the same assurances have been offered about the existing configurations, and almost half of all NHS providers were in deficit last year. That has led us to the disastrous situation where, according to the 2017-18 accounts published by NHS Improvement, NHS providers owed the Department of Health and Social Care more than £11 billion, up from £8.1 billion in the previous year. That sharp increase was a result of bail-outs given to trusts that ran into deficit as a result of underfunding.
Borrowing from the Secretary of State now exceeds private finance initiative liabilities. In 2016-17, £1.3 billion was repaid from trusts to the Department, of which £161 million was interest. Can the Minister set out what will happen if an ICP reaches financial deficit or collapses?

One thing that is clear from the draft ICP contract is that if the annual budgets provided are not sufficient to deliver the current levels of service, the ICP will be responsible for “managing changes in demand.” While there are merits in a system that incentivises keeping people well, there is a clear danger that demand will be managed by rationing access to treatment. Will the Minister rule out unilateral rationing of services by ICPs if they cannot keep to their budgets? What safeguards are in place to prevent further rationing of services, and who will be accountable in the event that patients want to challenge such a situation? It is far from clear who will ultimately make these decisions and who will be accountable for them. Where the split between the legal commissioner and provider is technically maintained, it is impossible to see in practice how an ICP would not be taking on core commissioning functions.

All this raises the spectre of a new postcode lottery, where patient experiences are uneven depending on who was contracted by an unaccountable panel of commissioners. The whole approach is farcical, and none of this has come before the House for what could be described as a meaningful vote. Experts from across the health and social care sector, and even the chief executive of NHS England, have all acknowledged not only the desirability, but the inevitability of new legislation. Will the Minister commit as part of the NHS long-term plan to set out in full the direction of travel for NHS reorganisation, the Government’s objectives, the criteria that will be used to determine when those objectives have been achieved, and a timeline for the necessary primary legislation?

3.47 pm

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. It is a pleasure to respond to the hon. Member for Warrington South (Faisal Rashid). I am pleased that he secured this debate, and I agree with him that the NHS is a great credit to our country. I know that the Opposition spokesman will have heard me say yesterday—I will repeat it—that the Government and I, as Minister for Health, greatly value the staff who work in the NHS. It is our absolute intention to ensure that they recognise that and that we continue to show that.

I want to start with a few facts, because having listened to what the hon. Member for Warrington South described, I think there are other things that are worth pointing out. There are 11,000 more nurses in the NHS than there were in 2010. There are 18,200 more nurses than in 2010. Almost nine out of 10 patients are seen within four hours in an emergency department. We are committed to 5,000 training places for doctors in general practice—this year saw 10% more than we aimed to achieve. Of course, this is the highest level of funding that the NHS has had in its 70 years. The hon. Gentleman raised a number of other issues, as did the Opposition spokesman, and I will try to respond to those in my speech.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) made a contribution. I have immense respect for her. Anyone who knows her knows that she always argues her case passionately and stands up for her constituents, and she did that again today. She and I have occasionally shared joint endeavours on St Helier Hospital. I think we both agree that there is a substantial case for keeping the acute services there. I think we would both agree—I say this in a constituency capacity—that the infrastructure needs upgrading, and I think we have had that discussion. She rightly points that we have had another consultation this year. As a Minister, I say that we expect any significant service changes to be subject to exactly the full public consultation she has described, if it is going to happen, and that the proposals must meet the Government’s four reconfiguration tests, which are support from GP commissioners; strengthened engagement with the public; clarity on the clinical evidence; and clarity and consistency with patients’ choice. She says that there have been rounds of consultations, as I certainly saw when I was on the council—I think she was already a Member of Parliament then—under Governments of all colours over the past 20 years.

It is the same with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I have had the pleasure of taking interventions from him in several debates. He is always a powerful advocate for his constituents. I listened carefully to his point about out-of-hours care, which may have been slightly out of the scope of the debate. Yesterday, I had the chance to visit the North Middlesex University Hospital. Some of its work on the integration of out-of-hours care and triaging in A&E moves along the lines that he discussed. I have seen that several times.

To address the crux of the debate, between 2016 and 2036, the UK population is expected to increase from 65.6 million to 71.8 million, which is a growth rate of about 10% in 20 years. In the same period, the number of people aged 75 and over is expected to grow by 64% from 5.3 million to 9 million. Those figures are clearly something to celebrate, showing that the NHS is doing exactly what we want it to, but they mean that more will need to be done to make sure that those years are quality years.

For the NHS to continue to deliver high-quality care in the next 20 years, as it has done for the last 70 years, we need to look at new models of care that promote more joined-up care across the NHS and social care. In the past few years, the Government have supported a number of pilots at local and national levels to test new models of care that bring together the NHS, local authorities and wider public services to develop new ways of ensuring that services are delivered in a more joined-up way. Those areas have seen some improvements in access to services, patient experience and moderating demand for acute services.

It is time for the NHS to move beyond those pilots and embrace wholesale transformational changes across the whole system in every part of the country. It is therefore developing a 10-year plan for its future, which is underpinned by a five-year funding offer. To support the NHS in delivering for patients across the country, the Government announced a new five-year budget settlement for the NHS, in which funding will grow on average by 3.4% each year to 2023-24. The hon. Member for Strangford, who has just left the Chamber, welcomed the fact that that means the NHS budget will increase.
by more than £20 billion compared with today, underpinning the 10-year plan to guarantee the future of the NHS.

The hon. Member for Warrington South remarked on sustainability and transformation partnerships, and commented on his own local STP. The Government are fully committed to NHS England’s vision of STPs transforming how care is delivered and putting the system on a sustainable footing for the future. We will back STPs where they are clinically led and locally supported.

The hon. Gentleman questioned some aspects of local democracy. Each partnership has to set out agreed priorities and say how they are going to be delivered, and have a strategic priority to work with partners in local authorities. The Cheshire and Merseyside STP is making some progress in building those relationships, but he is right to acknowledge—I acknowledge it as well—that it is an extremely large and diverse area.

Clearly, the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) will recognise that there are now nine local footprints, including Warrington, together. The idea is that they will develop some of the integration suggestions and plans, and the consultation with local authorities to which the hon. Member for Warrington South referred. The STP brings local areas together to tackle the challenges, and I think he would acknowledge that it makes sense to do that across a bigger area, so the smaller areas build into the larger area.

Last week, the Government announced that they were supporting the Cheshire and Merseyside STP with £11 million in capital spending for improving emergency department capacity at the St Helens and Knowsley Teaching Hospitals and for a 12-bed, tier-4 child and adolescent mental health services unit at Alder Hey Children’s Hospital. The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston challenged me on STPs, so I will say that, in their more mature form, they are integrated care systems that promote collaboration between NHS bodies, local government and local communities. The 10-year plan will set out how they will spread the integrated care models that have been developed and tested through the whole vanguard programme.

There was also a challenge about what were formerly known as accountable care organisations and are now called integrated care providers, with several questions about that. At a small number of sites, commissioners are looking at how contractual models can support more integrated care. To support that, NHS England has developed the draft integrated care provider contract which, if introduced, will give the NHS the option of having a single lead provider that is responsible for primary, community and hospital services, with the aim of integrating services across traditional silos.

If NHS England chooses to introduce a contract for the ICPs, Parliament will have a chance to debate the regulations. I recognise that the regulations are subject to the negative procedure, so there is not an automatic debate, but as the hon. Member for Warrington South will have spotted, in those circumstances, if Parliament decides there will be an opportunity to have that debate.

NHS England has recently concluded the public consultation on the draft ICP contract and we expect a response in due course.

I want to touch on the premise that the ICP contract is privatisation. It is completely misleading to suggest that an integrated provider model is a step towards privatising the health service. The NHS will always offer free healthcare at the point of use—that is not just the Government’s view. I am sure that the Library briefing that the hon. Member for Strangford challenged me to read notes the evidence from the Health and Social Care Committee, whose Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), said that the evidence received by the inquiry into integrated care—the report was published in July 2018—was that ICPs “and other efforts to integrate health...and social care, will not extend the scope of NHS privatisation and may effectively do the opposite.”

That is quite powerful and I hope that the hon. Members for Ellesmere Port and Neston and for Warrington South take note.

Justin Madders: I know what the Select Committee said; I am interested in what the Government are saying. Is the Minister ruling out any private provision from ICPs?

Stephen Hammond: I am not ruling out private providers from bidding, but it has been made clear, and I say again, that we expect any ICP contract to be won by NHS bodies. As I said, the evidence to the Select Committee inquiry tends to support that that is our view and that is what is likely to happen.

The Government have made it clear that the change is not about reorganising the NHS from the centre or adding more layers to an already complex system. As the Prime Minister reiterated in her speech in June, the Government should learn the lessons of the past and not try to impose change on the NHS. To achieve that, we firmly believe that any changes to the model of care for patients need to be locally led, informed by knowledge of the population and the population need, and supported by clinicians on ground.

That is why we have asked local leaders in STPs and integrated care systems to create five-year plans detailing how they will improve local services for patients and achieve financial sustainability. Of course, this is something that we may want, but it cannot just be wished into being, which is why the Government are supporting the NHS with £20 billion of additional funding.

Local plans will build on the work of the last three years to develop new ways of delivering services and enhance collective efforts to use that additional funding to improve people’s health and wellbeing. It is essential that that process proceeds in a spirit of genuine partnership and that all local partners, including local government, are fully involved from the outset.

For any significant system reconfiguration, we expect all parts of the system to be talking to the public regularly; it is vital that the public shape the future of their local services. That relates directly to the point that the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden made earlier. To make it absolutely clear, no changes will take place without public consultation and engagement.

After all, the aim of integrating services is not an end in itself; it is to improve the patient experience and quality of care, so it is essential that the views of the public should be at the heart of local plans. Integrated care means a health and care system built around
people’s needs, whereby physical, mental and social care needs can be addressed together, and patients should feel as if their care is being provided by one organisation.

Integration also gives us the means to avert ill health, preventing unnecessary hospital visits and supporting patients to have happier, healthier lives into old age, and taking the pressure off NHS staff. For example, in Thanet, the Margate Task Force is an integrated service that brings staff from 16 different agencies together in a single “street-level” team.

In conclusion, integrated care provides the best opportunity to ensure that the NHS continues to deliver the highest level of quality services to people and to meet the demands of the 21st century. The Government have supported the NHS to implement the five-year forward view and to develop new integrated ways of working to meet those demands. It is now time to drive forward view and to develop new integrated ways of

4.2 pm

Faisal Rashid: First, I thank all the Members who took part in this very important debate: my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh), and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders); and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I also thank the Minister for giving some reassurances and the answers to some of my questions.

I will make a couple of points. I have heard time after time that there are more doctors and 11,000 more nurses than there were in 2010. Clearly, the demand has been even greater, which is why there are still shortages. We really need to invest in more doctors and more nurses, to cope with the demand for them, which is quite significantly higher than the numbers from 2010 to 2018 that the Minister cited. The numbers do not really make sense. The Minister also mentioned value for money. He said that there was no privatisation as such, but he is not ruling it out. At the same time, if value for money is the criterion, one will definitely think that privatisation will happen.

In conclusion, the NHS is a very precious institution for all of us; the Minister agreed with me about that. I urge him to look very carefully at reorganisation and to get everybody involved. Let us work together to make it happen for the people of this country in the long term.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved,
That this House has considered NHS reorganisation.
mile from the safe harbour of Stornoway, HMY Iolaire was crowded with 280 men, mostly naval reservists returning to the safety and comfort of their homes after the horrors of the Great War. On this dark night of winter, a force ten gale was blowing from the south, hard onto the shore, and there was a heavy sea running. Men drowned as they jumped or slid into the sea from the pitching decks, were flung back into the angry foam from lifeboats awash and overloaded, were dashed against jagged rocks, or managed to swim and crawl ashore, only to die before they could reach shelter or aid. By the time the first New Year’s Day of peacetime dawned, 201 men had lost their lives, 181 of them on the very shores of the island they called home.

No one now alive in Lewis can ever forget the 1st of January 1919, and future generations will speak of it as the blackest day in the history of the island, for on it 200 of our bravest and best perished on the very threshold of their home under the most tragic of circumstances. The terrible disaster at Holm on New Years morning has plunged every home and every heart in Lewis into grief unutterable.”

I will come on to that unutterableness later. The roll continues:

"Language cannot express the desolation, the despair which this awful catastrophe has inflicted. One thinks of the wide circle of blood relations affected by the loss of even one of these gallant lads, and imagination sees these circles multiplied by the number of the dead, overlapping and overlapping each other till the whole island—every hearth and home in it—is shrouded in deepest gloom. All the island’s war losses in the past four cruel years—although these number fully four times the death roll of New Year’s Day morning—are not comparable to this unspeakable calamity. The black tragedy has not a redeeming feature.”

That was written by William Grant, the founder of the Stornoway Gazette, in January 1919, when the memory was of course very alive to the tragedy and its magnitude.

The Iolaire had come over specially from Stornoway to Kyle of Lochalsh to take men home for New Year. The admiralty had given English and Welsh servicemen a break for Christmas, and the Scots the new year, as was the developed custom and, indeed, the want at the time. The admiralty had known that there would be a bottleneck problem at Kyle to get the men across the Minch to Stornoway. The merchant seaman, Captain Colin Cameron, master of the MacBrayne mailboat, Sheila, knew that it could not accommodate all the extra naval reservists along with soldiers and passengers safely across the Minch, and he pressed, quite correctly, for a way to relieve the pressure of sheer numbers on the Sheila, and hence the Admiralty sent the Iolaire to Kyle. It was not a great start. When she arrived in Kyle at 4 pm, a miscalculation between the bridge and the engine room meant she hit the pier and sustained damage to 10 feet of her gunnel. That was a very inauspicious start.

For those who were to board that night, the journey to Kyle of Lochalsh involved crowded and slow railway journeys from Glasgow, first north to Inverness and then west through Dingwall to Kyle, with stoppages. The Glasgow to Kyle journey took about 13 and a half hours, arriving at Kyle at 6.15 pm on Hogmanay 1918. Many of those on board the Iolaire that night had travelled up from the south of England and had come through London before they went up to Glasgow and onwards with their cousins, neighbours, comrades and fellow islanders.

The second part of the train that had taken 13 and a half hours arrived at 7 o’clock, 45 minutes later, and the Iolaire set sail at 7.30 pm, with naval personnel from Lewis. Soldiers from Lewis who wanted to get on the Iolaire had been ordered off. They wanted to get on because friends, cousins and neighbours had been on it.

It is worth pointing out, on the circle of overlap mentioned in the 1919 writing, that those who were the friends, cousins and neighbours could be the same person, such is the nice interlinked happenstance that islands tend to have. That is true to this day and it was certainly true in 1919.

As I have noted, at 1.55 am on New Year’s Day 1919, the Iolaire ran aground on the rocks at Holm—the Beasts of Holm. The weather had been blowing force eight to 10 on the shore, when she struck the rocks and listed to starboard at a 35° angle. Many of those on board thought she had hit a mine and about 50 to 60 jumped off or slid into the sea. From then on, she was hit by waves, strongly and regularly. Concern about the Iolaire’s course had been spotted by a nearby fishing boat that was sailing the route as well, the Spider. Given the time of year, alcohol was of course suspected, and disputed. What is not in dispute is the loss of life. There is so much to say and it is impossible to do it justice, other than to remember, be aware and think well of those people who lost their lives 100 years ago.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): We are all delighted that the hon. Gentleman has secured this debate. Another thing that is not disputed is that John Macleod, who was my great-grand-uncle, swam ashore with a rope and probably managed to save 40 people’s lives. The real sadness is that so many people who got ashore never managed to get to a home, because nobody was expecting the ship to arrive. The misery for the families the next day—finding dead bodies on the beach—was just so total.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: I am grateful for that intervention. I was just going to come on to John Finlay MacLeod; I had not realised he was the great-grand-uncle of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), and I thank him for pointing that out.

Those who lost their lives might be people we may meet ourselves someday, depending on what happens after this life. Of the 79 who survived, as the hon. Gentleman pointed out, 40 owe their lives to fellow crewman and passenger, experienced seaman and Royal Naval reservist, John Finlay MacLeod, from Port of Ness, who swam ashore with a rope after a couple of attempts. He was swept out at one point. Four followed behind him on the small rope he swam with, the heaving line, but they had the presence of mind to use that line to pull a six-inch hauser, and a further 35 were able to follow. The actions of the hon. Gentleman’s great-grand-uncle saved 40 of the 79 who survived. It was quite a remarkable achievement, although it is sad to note that some were swept off the rope or sucked off the rope by the swell, and lost their lives.

John Finlay MacLeod was said to be a very daring man and, for the lives he saved, many were glad he was. There were many other heroes that night, and it is impossible in the time available to do them any measure of justice. It is worth pondering the effects of the Iolaire on the island of Lewis and Harris, the third largest of the British Isles after the island of Britain and the island of Ireland. The excellent book by Malcolm Macdonald breaks it down into areas of Lewis, because it is a big island. In the parish of Barvas, Ness lost 23 men. It is striking as we look through the names that
there are still people—friends of mine—who have much the same names, from those areas: John MacDonald, Murdo Campbell, John MacLeod, Angus MacLeod, Angus Morrison, Donald Morrison, Donald MacLeod, John Murray and Roderick Morrison. These names are as familiar today as they were then in that area.

The parish of Barvas—Borve to Shawbost—lost 28 men. Uig parish in the east lost nine men; in Uig parish in the west, 14 were lost. In Stornoway parish, North Tolsta, 11 men were lost; in Stornoway parish, Back to Tong, nine men were lost. In Lochs parish, North Lochs, 21 men were lost; in Lochs parish, Kinloch, four men were lost; in Lochs parish, Pairc, eight men were lost. In Stornoway parish, Point, 39 men were lost. In Stornoway borough and district, eight men were lost. On the Isle of Harris, four men were lost; and on the Isle of Scalpay, one man was lost—Finlay Morrison, Fionnlaigh Dhomhnaill Fhionnlaigh. One of the things that should be noted in the excellent book is the patronymics of these people, which help people reading it today to know who their relations were. Finally, in the rest of the United Kingdom, 18 men were lost; they were the crew of the Iolaire, who perished.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): It is important that we remember those who were lost. Although the numbers do not seem huge, my hon. Friend will know from living in those islands that the numbers he has read out are almost an entire generation of young men. The devastation of those left behind is hard for us to comprehend. Being from a military family myself, I know the excitement that the families would have when sailors were returning from sea. To have those hopes dashed—the families left behind must have suffered a double blow, following the horrors of the first world war.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The numbers are a huge percentage of the able-bodied men in the area, and of the able-bodied men who had survived a global catastrophe. That made it doubly difficult.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful speech about the unspeakable tragedy that happened to Lewis and Harris. I say it is unspeakable, but he is speaking very powerfully about this terrible tragedy. Perhaps it is hopeful that at the centenary we are able to speak and very powerfully about this terrible tragedy. Perhaps it is unspeakable, but he is speaking about the unspeakable tragedy that happened to Lewis and Harris. I say it is unspeakable, but he is speaking about the unspeakable tragedy that happened to Lewis and Harris.

Angus Brendan MacNeil: That made it doubly difficult.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that interventions should be short and to the point. They are tending to become a little lengthy, and I intend to call the Minister in a minute.

4.20 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.32 pm

On resuming—

Angus Brendan MacNeil: To resume where we left off, I was asked a question by the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) about how people recovered. From the Iolaire, 67 women were left widowed and 209 children had lost fathers. A woman I met in her mid-90s who was known as Mòr Bhrù—her name was Marion MacLeod, née Smith—who was asked by the author John MacLeod what her mother had said of that night years after it had happened. He wrote: “We never spoke of it,” says Mòr calmly. “I never once asked her.”

That indicates the silence of which the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) spoke. The tragedy of the Iolaire in many ways is the pain and the silence, and people not wanting to relive that awful moment.

In finishing, I want to highlight a couple of things. This Friday, I will be in Stornoway in the Nicolson Institute for a dìleab event. It is a memory in song and poetry to the loss of the Iolaire and the men who were on it. It is worth highlighting that in Sheshader and Point, a former principal teacher of English—he was in the Nicolson Institute when I was there; he was also a principal teacher of rugby, incidentally—and local resident Mike Shailes are making a point of marking the Iolaire by going round and putting stones and marks in the 10 houses. There were 10 men from Sheshader on the Iolaire and all 10 drowned that day. The village had already lost 10 in world war one. There were 300 people living in Sheshader and Point. There are now 120. Incidentally, six were lost in world war two. The two people I mentioned have gone around and marked the ruins and houses where people lived. That is a commendable effort of memory.

Finally, I asked in my office yesterday whether anyone had a relative involved in the Iolaire. One of my staff, Cathy Macinne, said that her uncle Malcolm MacLeod—Calum Mhurachaidh Phadraig Choinnich—was 18 when he was lost. Thinking back, I knew Cathy’s father quite well. He was active in the Scottish National party when I was not and was working for the BBC. It is notable that because of Malcolm’s young age, his family, like those of every other young serviceman who died, did not receive any war gratuity or compensation from the
Ministry of Defence at the time. Times were hard and people were lost, but sometimes things were compounded further.

We do remember them. We think of them, and we think of the long shadow they have cast over Lewis in particular and Harris. All of us who have come into contact with or lived in Lewis have known about the Iolaire and what it caused. We cannot do it justice here, but we can remember them and think well of their lives and of them.

4.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): It is a real pleasure to respond to this debate from the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil)—I hope I pronounced that right. It is a poignant reminder, given what else is happening around the Palace today, of the extraordinary events that took place 100 years ago and how we should reflect on them.

In the past month or so, I think we all paused to pay gratitude to what a nation did 100 years ago. An entire nation stepped forward to defend our values and our way of life beyond our shores. It began and confirmed a trend for our nation to step forward in defence of the international standard of liberty and to make our mark and help influence the world around us as a force for good. In reflecting on what happened 100 years ago, we can get lost in the sheer scale of the event. The third battle of Ypres took place on what is now the location of Tyne Cot cemetery. In a period of just 100 days, there were 500,000 casualties—so many individuals, each of them with a name and a family. Many of them did not return.

What happened 100 years ago on the other side of new year and its impact—particularly as it took place after the war itself—are so tragic. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising the matter so that we can reflect on the bravery of those returning home from service in the armed forces.

As the hon. Gentleman has touched on, His Majesty’s Yacht the Iolaire was so close to getting home those who had served. I will go through, as he has, some of the tragic events that took place on 1 January 1919. Just seven weeks after the end of the first world war, hundreds of servicemen from the highlands and islands of Scotland arrived on trains at the Kyle of Lochalsh. They were going home for the first new year of peace. HMY Iolaire set off expecting to arrive. In the early hours of new year’s day, as she approached Stornoway harbour, she foundered on the infamous rocks, the Beasts of Holm, within half a mile of Stornoway pier, where relatives were eagerly waiting to welcome their loved ones home from the war.

As the hon. Gentleman said, the numbers have now been updated. In all, 201 of the 284 men—mostly maritime reservists—onboard the Iolaire were lost. I join him and others in paying tribute to all those who tragically lost their lives that night. Of them, 174 were men from the Isle of Lewis who tragically drowned literally within sight of their home. A further seven were from the Isle of Harris. A further 18 crew and two passengers were also lost. The loss widowed 67 women, and at least 209 children lost their fathers. The loss of the ship is considered to be Britain’s worst peacetime disaster at sea since the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, and the worst peacetime loss in British waters in the 20th century. No comparable event has fallen exclusively on one small population.

While a third of the bodies of those lost were never recovered, others were washed up on the shoreline and found by their families. The village of Leurbost, for example, with 51 houses, lost 32 men in the war with a further 11 lost on the Iolaire. There were 25 sets of brothers on board, and only one set survived without a loss. Although the first world war affected all communities, this was a devastating blow to the island community. The sailors had come through a global conflict, only to be washed up dead on their own island shore. There are so many deeply personal tragedies and stories to tell that I cannot recount them all.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Angus Brendan MacNeil) for securing the debate—I am sorry that I missed the first couple of minutes of what was a powerful speech. I vividly remember first hearing about the Iolaire when I was 27 years old, which tells us something about the gaps in what we teach ourselves about the history of where we come from.

Does the Minister agree that, although the casualties of the Iolaire had survived the horrors of war, they and others who were killed in peacetime activities during a time of war deserve to be remembered in the same way as those who were killed in enemy action? In some cases, they died in the water 20 feet from shore. It was no comfort to their families to know that they died so close to home; the loss was just as great as it was for those who lost loved ones at Ypres, the Somme, or on other battlefields.

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman makes a pertinent point. It is difficult for any of us to place ourselves in the shoes of the families who lost someone in the first world war, or indeed in any conflict. It is extremely painful to have survived a horrific war such as world war one, to be returning home and then to die literally within eyesight of one’s final destination.

I was just touching on the make-up of those who were onboard the vessel itself. Not all the maritime reservists served at sea; some served in the trenches on the western front in the Royal Naval division. Two friends who evaded capture in Holland went on to serve in the Mediterranean together, travelling back home on the Iolaire, only for one of them to be tragically lost.

One story that was particularly pertinent was that of 23-year-old John Macaskill from North Sandwick. His body was washed up by the cemetery wall. His home was on the other side of the cemetery itself, so after four years of conflict—four years of being away—the sea literally brought him home. It is only fitting that, leading up to the centenary of this tragic loss, we are taking the opportunity to remember those who lost their lives within sight of their home, their families and their island communities.

It is important to remember that the loss of the Iolaire is not only a significant matter for the communities on the isles of Lewis and Harris. It is also appropriate that we take the opportunity to highlight this tragic story to the nation. I understand that events to
Mr Ellwood

Mr Ellwood: Commemorate the loss will be held at the Kyle of Lochalsh and in Stornoway at the Iolaire memorial overlooking the site of the disaster, and a service will be held at sea, near the Beasts of Holm.

The Ministry of Defence has agreed to a significant level of naval support for those events in the form of the attendance of the flag officer of Scotland and Northern Ireland, a guard of honour and the Royal Marine band contingent. That is commensurate with the support given to other first world war commemorations in recent years. The Royal Marines band service and a Royal Navy guard will formally attend the commemoration ceremonies. The naval personnel selected to deliver that support will represent the finest traditions of the Royal Navy, ensuring that we pay due respect to those sailors who did not return home.

I recognise the significance of the loss of the Iolaire to the island communities, and I thank all those involved in the considerable work that has been undertaken to raise awareness of this tragic loss, and to ensure that there is a fitting commemoration of this centenary event. I thank the Royal Navy and Royal Marines personnel for supporting those commemorations over the Christmas and new year period. I also thank the hon. Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar for bringing this matter to the attention of the Palace of Westminster and the House of Commons, as we reflect not only on what happened 100 years ago, but on the devastation to his community.

Question put and agreed to.
Mr Vaizey: The hon. Gentleman makes a valuable point. Obviously I am focusing on the specific proposal for a reservoir, but there is a lot more to say about managing water resources in the south-east. GARD is not saying that we should not build any more infrastructure.
to make more water resources available; it is saying that the Severn transfer option is viable and cheaper, and there is also the possibility of the Teddington abstraction scheme. Thames Water itself acknowledges that water transfer is an option, although it argues that it is not as good an option as a reservoir. It also claims to be looking at the Teddington scheme.

I want to give other hon. Members a chance to make the points that need to be made, but I want to ask the Minister about a number of points. I would be grateful for her insight into what work the Department has done with Thames Water to assess not just its proposal for a reservoir but its overall water resources management plan. Will she assure me and my constituents that, as this journey continues, Thames Water, her Department and other stakeholders, such as the Environment Agency, will fully involve my constituents in their deliberations and consultations? I hope she will support me, my constituents and Oxfordshire County Council in calling for a public inquiry to ensure this process is conducted in an open and proper manner.

I will draw my remarks to a conclusion by making the following points. When I sat firmly on the fence about the reservoir a decade ago, I must confess that I was not entirely confident that a public inquiry would lead to the reservoir being dismissed. I was pleasantly surprised that the inquiry concluded that a reservoir was unnecessary. It is sometimes easy to dismiss local campaign groups as nimby or as people who will find almost any way to stop any kind of development near where they live, but, as it turned out, the campaign group defeated Thames Water in a sort of David and Goliath battle with the power of its arguments. The planning inspector found that Thames Water had not made its arguments effectively. I do not think that a lot has changed since 2010 or that the alternative options have been explored fully, and they need to be.

On the point the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) made about chalk streams and the environment, I have one other element of frustration, and it is partly directed at the Minister—her post, as opposed to her personally, because she is obviously a very good friend of mine. It seems slightly odd that Thames Water, a private company, is being left, to a certain extent, to its own devices to come up with a solution to a potential water crisis in the south-east over the next 10 or 20 years. It would be much better if this whole debate were led by the Government. They should say, “This is the need over the next 25 years. This is our best guess—made on all the available expertise, in a dispassionate fashion. These are the best ways to combat water shortage. They are about not just tackling leakage and more efficient home use, with water meters and the like, but realistic infrastructure that provides the best access to water resources with the minimum disruption to communities.”

I am delighted, at what I think is still quite an early stage in this process, to have had the opportunity to raise these issues at the highest level.

5.2 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) for securing this debate on an incredibly important local issue. Like him, I have had much correspondence from my constituents about it. Although the proposed reservoir lies in his constituency, my constituents—in and around south Abingdon, in particular—are understandably very interested in these proposals, and I hope to raise their concerns today.

I absolutely recognise the need to ensure a safe, secure water supply for the future, but as a local MP it is also my job to stand up and speak out on behalf of my constituents, who have justified worries about these proposals. Given the large size of the scheme, we have to make sure we take them with us if needed.

As has already been mentioned, we have been here before. In 2010, the community campaigners, led by GARD and supported by my Liberal Democrat colleagues, were successful in their campaign to the Planning Inspectorate, which determined that there was “no immediate need” for a reservoir on this scale. We have gone into the future since then, but not that far into the future. As the right hon. Gentleman asked at the end of his speech, what has changed so materially in those eight years?

I thank GARD for its longstanding campaign, hard work and tenacity. In many ways, it has brought the band back together to fight this again. I also thank Councillors Catherine and Richard Webber, who have been keeping me updated and involved in the fight.

In 2010, the project was the subject of a public inquiry, which found that Thames Water’s plan was not fit for purpose, as it had not properly evaluated the alternative options. That is critical. What has changed? The proposal is now 50% bigger. It is the size of Heathrow airport, and will hold 150 million tonnes of water. It has also been moved forward: the intention is to build it by 2037. This is not just the same campaign run again; it is a campaign looking at a proposal that is even bigger and therefore requires even more scrutiny than the first time round.

The objections in my postbag and email inbox have focused on whether there is a need for the reservoir at all, the plans themselves and—this is where the right hon. Gentleman and I are absolutely on the same page—the need for the public to have their say on the proposals. I will take each of those in turn.

On the need for the reservoir, I shall not build on the right hon. Gentleman’s speech, although I thank him for educating me about the lesser-known facts about chalk streams. I dare say I did not know that. Every day is a learning day, so I thank him very much. I am keen for this debate to be a chance to raise residents’ concerns. I will start with my colleague, Debby Hallett, councillor for Botley and Sunningwall and deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats. She said that she would like to see the priority being given to fixing leaks elsewhere in the system. She speaks to residents, and they are all concerned that the water is not even for our area.

That is echoed by another resident, who wrote to me ahead of this debate. I said in a tweet and on my Facebook group, “What do you think? We are raising this today.” She said:

“The water from the reservoir is not, in any case, for use within the area supplied by Thames Water, but is to be sold elsewhere for the profit of Thames Water. It will be paid for by the customers of Thames Water but they will not benefit from it.”
There is disquiet that the bill payers will be the ones funding the new reservoir, which will become a major asset on Thames Water’s balance sheet. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his clarification about the nature of the company that might be set up. There is concern about who will pay, at least in monetary terms, and not least for building the thing in the first place. Many questioned the need for the development at all, and put forward alternatives including installing more desalination plants along the Thames, transferring raw water from the River Severn to the Thames, reducing water consumption, and addressing leakage.

The National Infrastructure Commission’s recent “Preparing for a drier future” report states that strategic inter-regional water transfers are needed, but water companies are failing to plan for them properly. As I understand it, Thames Water has pushed back the option of a Severn-Thames transfer until 2080, which is a very, very long way away and, frankly, ignores the current problems. Instead, it says that a reservoir is cheaper than a transfer, which is counter to what the National Infrastructure Commission said. There needs to be some joined-up thinking.

On the issue of leaks, is Thames Water doing enough elsewhere in the system, and are its targets for tackling leakages ambitious enough? One of GARD’s central arguments is that Thames Water, after discussions with Ofwat, will reduce its leakage by half by 2045, and has revised its population projections. The campaigners suggest that those two actions remove the need for the reservoir in the immediate term—that was the reason why it was rejected by the 2010 inquiry. They were surprised to see the proposal re-emerge with the earlier delivery date of 2037.

My first question to the Minister is: has the Department made an assessment of Thames Water’s plans, proposals and forecasts? If not, will she commit to doing so? Have there been any independent analyses of the costs to Thames Water of rectifying leakages and saving water loss in that way? Unfortunately, residents simply do not trust Thames Water on this issue, so we need some independence in the assessments. We need an evidence base on which to build the case to the public—not just about leakages, but about the whole thing: negatives and positives.

I did not receive only negatives in my inbox; some were a little optimistic. Rachel in Abingdon wrote to me to say that she “supports the reservoir for future generations”, and that she does not want the decision to keep being put off, but would rather just get on with it. She also made the very good point that developers—a lot of housing development is happening in Oxfordshire at the moment—need to look at greater use of grey water for the likes of toilet flushing. Has the Minister discussed that with colleagues in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government? As ever, cross-departmental working could help to solve the wider issues.

Rachel says that if the reservoir does go ahead, “we need to make sure that Thames Water builds this reservoir with amenities and leisure, and not just an inaccessible reservoir.” I completely agree with her, and it could well be a great opportunity for our area. I say that with an element of caution however, because of my experience of the £100 million Oxford flood alleviation scheme. We were promised leisure facilities such as a cycle path that would go all the way through and which, I am sorry to say, was omitted from the final plans. I therefore remain gently sceptical about some of the promises that might be made at this stage. As that is also in the Minister’s brief, will she continue to encourage Oxfordshire County Council and the Environment Agency to think again about that cycle path, which we had been promised at the outset of the plans?

That brings me to the plans and the sheer scale of the reservoir, which is going to be the size of Heathrow. If one took a map of the reservoir and overlaid it on a map of Abingdon, it covers it. That is extraordinarily large, and one of the biggest reasons why residents have raised concerns. Sharron wrote on my Facebook page to say she was concerned that this would not be a valley-type reservoir that could enhance the area and provide leisure and tourism facilities. Instead, she was worried that the design would end up like “a massive tank” and the “tallest structure in the vale”.

We all love Didcot power station—don’t get me wrong. Big structures in our area can be a cause of love, but having said that, if the reservoir is as Sharron described, it would be a blight on what is otherwise an incredibly beautiful landscape.

The environment is equally important. Many residents who contacted me were seriously concerned about the displacement of species. As the RSPB parliamentary species champion for the skylark, it would be remiss of me not to raise concerns about the potential impact of the proposals on many bird species, including the skylark. David, who is involved with Abingdon Naturalists Society, says that he is particularly concerned about the destruction of an “undisturbed area of countryside that presently hosts breeding curlew, lapwing, grey partridge, skylark, all of which are red listed species.”

Other terrestrial wildlife might also be eliminated.

Richard Harding, a trustee of the Campaign to Protect Rural England, says:

“It will obviously have severe consequences to the environment and communities in Oxfordshire. The loss and damages to land, resources, heritage and communities would be substantial. The proposed area of flooding is a massive, hugely significant multi-period historical and archaeological landscape—the reality of what is there has not been grasped.”

That brings me to flooding which, I hope the Minister is aware, is a major concern for residents of the area. There were huge floods in Abingdon not very long ago. Marion wrote to me to ask for a second public inquiry into the proposals. She also raised the increased risk of flooding, particularly on the south Abingdon flood-relief land. Can the Minister indicate what assessments have been carried out on how the plans might affect the floodplain? There are schemes in place, but from what I understand, they were conceived after the first reservoir had been rejected. Do they now include space for the new reservoir?

My primary concern is to make sure that residents are heard. In Oxfordshire, where there is massive development going on everywhere, there are countless examples of residents from all over feeling that their voices have not been heard, not least on the elephantine Oxford to Cambridge expressway, from which they have felt totally frozen out. That is the main reason why we
feel that we need a public inquiry now. I raised that with the Department and the response that I received from the Minister’s private secretary stated that “it would not be appropriate for the Government to direct Thames Water to carry out further consultation on its water resources management plan” until it responds to its latest consultation.

Will the Minister, as previous Governments have done, commit to insisting on a public inquiry on what will be a massive infrastructure project for our area?

We must be clear—local Liberal Democrats and I are absolutely clear—that we will fight for people to be able to have their say. People in Oxfordshire are reasonable; they will listen to the evidence. As my constituency neighbour, the right hon. Member for Wantage, said, people simply want to know that the proposal is the only option left and that all others have been looked at. I believe that the residents of Abingdon and elsewhere would listen to evidence, but we need a public inquiry to ensure that we have all the facts to hand before we make any decisions.

5.15 pm

Jon Cruddas (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): I was not going to speak this afternoon; I came to listen. There is a little bit of time left so I will say a few words, but I will not take up too much of Conservative Members’ time: they obviously have urgent meetings on the Estate to get to over the next couple of hours, as their party disintegrates.

The two speeches that have been made were very thoughtful and contained nuanced arguments about the case for and concerns about the reservoir. I came to listen because, although this is primarily a local matter, it throws up a lot of issues about ways in which we can achieve new water; the supply, distribution and quality of new homes; the role of the water companies themselves; and patterns of regulation—to name but a few.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on securing the debate. I know something about it because of my interest in chalk streams. As I understand it, Thames Water announced its new plans to start construction on the reservoir in 2025. I totally understand the local concerns that have been registered about the proposal, because it was rejected in 2010 at the public inquiry. There is a general concern that, to satisfy growth in London and the south of England—another consultation is ongoing—the Thames Water plan for the reservoir suggests a storage and distribution hub for the south-east.

Objectively, it seems clear that we need new water and new infrastructure, including reservoirs. I accept, however, that there are other suggestions for bringing new water into the stressed south-east, including transfers from Wales and the River Severn, or water re-use and desalination. There are a whole number of other proposed remedies.

One point I want to flag up that has been mentioned in the debate but which is often overlooked in the case for any new supportive water infrastructure, is the degradation of the river systems in England—specifically, of the chalk streams. As the right hon. Member for Wantage mentioned in his speech, England has a unique concentration of chalk streams—160 of the 210 that exist globally—and they are disproportionately in the south of England. Yet they are in an appalling state: no water is moving in many of them and there is no flow.

More generally, I recently saw data that estimated that only 14% of the rivers across England are considered to have reached good ecological standards. At the same time, demand for water, especially through new house building in the south of England, has dramatically increased.

Those two apparently separate issues are intrinsically related. A policy failure to provide new water means that our water companies extract water from our rivers, which cannot cope and subsequently die. At the same time, excess sewage is discharged into the rivers by those same companies, further undermining their quality and sustainability. Time and again, the water companies have been fined, but they take the hit—there are notorious cases of discharge by Thames Water. In effect, they free-ride their ecological responsibilities.

The situation has to be sorted out via public policy making because, as a consequence of all this, it has been 42 years since we have built a reservoir. The right hon. Gentleman, when introducing the debate, intimated that he was moving closer to Labour’s policy on water ownership and frustrations with the current system. Responsibility lies with a number of different authorities: the Environment Agency, the National Rivers Authority, the Government and the subject of today’s debate, Thames Water.

I repeat that I do not want to stray into local planning consultations, and I respect the contributions by the debate so far, which have made powerful cases, but an overall case needs to be made on consumer demand and preserving our unique English river systems, especially in the south of England: new infrastructure is needed. That does not mean that I am in the pocket of the water companies, but consequential environmental issues are involved, and the clock is ticking. New build, or the start of the build, in 2025 is being talked about, but any cursory look at the English river system tells us that we need urgent action now.

5.20 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on securing this debate, which is a superb opportunity to talk about how the voices of local residents must be heard when addressing the genuine water crisis that the UK faces. He mentioned that we live in a damp country, and indeed we do, but according to the Environment Agency, we are actually in the lower quartile globally of available water resources per capita, which means that we need to value every drop—much more than we do at the moment.

Climate change is real and happening to us here in Britain. No single measure can tackle it, but no single measure of water policy is mitigating it. That is why we need a number of separate buckets of action, including: action on leakage, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), to lower the amount of lost water, including the 30% lost on customers’ properties, not just on the public network;
a focus on reducing per-person water usage from the
national average of about 130 litres a day—some people
use considerably more—and increasing grey water use,
which was mentioned earlier and could contribute to
that; building and supporting the construction of more
water transfers; and the Severn option, which is important
in this context. On that, we should focus on the use of
canals as an option, instead of a big pipe, and the date
that was mentioned, 2080, seems far too far away.

Other actions include a necessary look at how to
build more water storage in areas of water stress. Although
as a nation we have not built any new reservoirs, we
have certainly provided additional water storage, sometimes
using quarries and mines—nothing on the size and
scale envisaged at Abingdon. Only then, at the very end
of the scale, should we look at water desalination, which
itself has a huge climate change effect.

The right hon. Member for Wantage talked about
population change. When looking into the future, it is
important for us to take a best guess at how many
people will be using water. The latest statistics show that
the south-east of England will have 4.1 million more
people by 2045. To put that in a currency that we might
all understand in this place, an additional 54 MPs
would be required to represent that population. By
2080, that could be an extra 10 million, or 133 more
MPs—heaven help us all! That will put pressure on an
already water-stressed region.

With climate change, we have to recognise that we
will not only have problems of water shortage at certain
times of the year—we will also have problems with too
much water at other times of the year. That issue was
mentioned earlier in the debate.

I have to admit that I was not an expert in chalk
rivers or streams before today, but I feel that I have
learned an awful lot. The issue of over-abstraction from
our watercourses and rivers is of importance because as
our communities become more water-stressed and as
the pressure to reduce per-capita consumption is applied,
the temptation, sadly, is to abstract still more water
from our precious river environments. We need to avoid
that, to ensure that we preserve those fragile and precious
natural wildlife habitats, whether of aquatic life, birds
or mammals.

Before I was elected, I advised people on how to build
controversial buildings, mainly skyscrapers and football
stadiums. The same principle applies to reservoirs: the
case must be clearly set out right from the start. To be
honest, I do not think that Thames Water has put the
argument for the Abingdon reservoir that well, and it
needs to do better. Increasing supply, of course, has to
be done alongside demand management, which also
needs a conversation with water bill payers. If there is to
be such huge investment, however—a carbon-intensive
investment—the case must be put clearly.

The right hon. Gentleman said that it is important to
be neutral in this debate, and that is how the Opposition
come to it. We think, however, that a number of principles
should apply in this case as we go forward, especially as
the decision might well be taken out of the hands of
local councillors and made at the national level through
the NSIP—nationally significant infrastructure project—
process. That is why genuine consultation and the voice
of local people must be heard much more in the debate
than perhaps it has been to date.

We need to ensure that the concerns about the new
reservoir involve not only the size and scale but the
construction, and the impact of that over many years,
in addition to the impact over many years. Thames
Water needs to make proposals, focused by
genuine and intensive consultation. Such consultation
should not just ask, “What do you think of our plans?”
but involve genuine engagement that listens to affected
communities.

There is also a challenge for Government to look at
what resources we need. At present, the water resource
plan of each company sits as an island apart from the
areas alongside. There is a clear case for joining up
those plans into a national water resource plan so that
we can understand the impacts, especially if we are to
have more water transfer into areas of greater water
stress. We need to understand the national picture.

I hope that Thames Water is listening to this carefully.
If it is to make the case for the Abingdon reservoir, it
needs to do so clearly, engaging local people and taking
them with it. At the moment, my concern is that that
conversation is not as full and as thorough as it could be.

5.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):
It is a pleasure to respond to my right hon. Friend the
Member for Wantage (Mr Vaziey), who secured the
debate, and to the other Members who contributed.

Water is essential for everything we do. It is also
essential for a healthy environment and a prosperous
economy. A reliable water supply is taken for granted
but, despite its reputation for rain, which has been
mentioned many times, England risks water shortages,
in particular in certain areas. Climate change and increasing
population, especially in the drier south and east, as
well as the need to protect the environment—including
chalk streams—bring further challenges. A water company’s
job is to take account of those factors and to provide a
reliable supply of safe drinking water. The Government
and the water regulator’s job is to check that they are
doing that effectively.

Thames Water supplies water to about 10 million
household customers and 215,000 businesses in London
and across the Thames valley. Its existing plan shows a
one-in-four chance over the next 25 years that large
numbers of households and businesses will have water
supplies cut off for extended periods because of drought.
That is a lower protection than most other water companies
provide. We must expect Thames Water to act on customers’
need for a more resilient supply, to manage other pressures
of a growing population and changing climate, and to
protect the environment that we treasure and on which
we rely.

Thames Water has engaged with regulators, stakeholders
and customers throughout the development of its draft
water resources management plan. In February 2018,
Thames Water published its draft plan for consultation,
which explains how the company plans to provide a
secure and sustainable supply of water for its customers
for the next 80 years, from 2020 to 2100. In October and
November this year, Thames Water provided a further
opportunity for comment on the changes and revisions
made to the draft plan as a result of the first consultation.
That further consultation closed on 28 November. Thames
Water sought stakeholder and customer views on its draft plan through a variety of channels, including public meetings, an online survey and written submissions.

I hope that my right hon. Friend appreciates that, as Thames Water has just completed its consultation process on the draft plan, it is now preparing its statement of response to the consultation, which the Environment Agency will assess in due course. It will provide advice to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in the new year. That process is ongoing, so officials and Ministers at DEFRA have not yet had the opportunity to consider the advice from the Environment Agency. As such, the Government cannot comment on any proposals suggested through the water resources management plan process.

The Government and the water regulator issue detailed guidance to water companies that sets out the Government’s expectations that companies should: first, take a long-term strategic approach to protecting and enhancing resilient water supplies; secondly, consider every option to meet future public water supply needs; thirdly, protect and enhance our environment and act collaboratively; and, fourthly, promote efficient water use and reduce leakage.

If a water company forecasts a water supply deficit, it should appraise all the options available to it and should justify its preferred solution in its water resources management plan. The Environment Agency and Ofwat are both statutory consultees to the water resources management plans. As I mentioned, the Environment Agency will also advise the Secretary of State on the draft plan. As part of its current price review, Ofwat has set out clear measures to ensure that the proposals companies bring forward, and the costs of delivering them, are subject to appropriate scrutiny to protect customers’ interests in the long term.

In the business plan that Thames Water submitted to Ofwat, it proposed costs for work to develop the reservoir proposals further, rather than the infrastructure costs themselves. If the proposals go forward, the infrastructure costs will come forward in future plans, which will be scrutinised, possibly at the price review in 2024 if construction were to start in 2025 or 2026. In the plans as they stand, the reservoir is expected to come online for use in 2037. I hope hon. Members have been assured that there are processes in place to assess whether water company plans are robust.

Leakage and other options were mentioned. The National Infrastructure Commission estimates that by 2050, around an additional 3.5 billion litres of water per day will be required to maintain current levels of resilience to drought in England. At least a third of that—1 billion litres—needs to come from new infrastructure, and the other two thirds from water efficiency and leakage reduction. To put that in context, 3.5 billion litres per day is almost enough water to fill Wembley stadium every day. Thames Water’s proposed reservoir would provide about 300 million litres per day.

The Government recognise that to meet our future water needs, we require a twin-track approach that combines demand reduction, including leakage reduction, with long-term investment in supply infrastructure. With respect to leakage, the Government have made their view clear and the industry has responded. The water companies’ business plans are on track to meet Ofwat’s challenge to reduce leaks by at least 15% by 2025. Over the long term, the industry has committed to working to an ambitious target to reduce leaks by 50% by 2050. We will hold it to account on that.

The need for new infrastructure is set out in the draft national policy statement for water resources infrastructure, which was recently laid under the Planning Act 2008. That statement sets out that, alongside demand reduction and tackling leakage, a mix of water infrastructure schemes will be required to meet our future water supply needs, including reservoirs, water transfers, desalination and reuse. The statement applies to nationally significant infrastructure projects, and I expect that the proposed Abingdon scheme would qualify as such a project.

I assure my right hon. Friend that extensive pre-application consultation and engagement will need to be undertaken by applicants using the Planning Act 2008 regime. Members of the public can participate in the examination process by registering their interest, thus ensuring that local views can be heard. I think it is fair to say that the planning process will be different from last time, because in the past month Parliament has voted in favour of a new process for infrastructure projects that are deemed nationally significant. Consideration of a development consent order application at a public inquiry would start on the basis that the most appropriate option for meeting water supply needs had been selected through the resource management plans. As I pointed out, Ofwat will also scrutinise the proposed costs for the full project if they come forward in future plans.

Hon. Members asked whether the water would be used just for the Thames Water area. It is fair to say that Thames Water has been working with Water Resources in the South East—an alliance of the six south-east water companies—to ensure that a more collaborative approach is taken to water resources planning, and its reservoir proposals would benefit other companies in the south-east. The Government and regulators expect water companies to collaborate at a regional level with other companies and sectors to produce plans that work for that region. That allows water companies to consider the most efficient and economically, socially and environmentally beneficial solution for the whole region, allowing customers, business, society and the environment to benefit from economies of scale. We expect such collaboration to be reflected in companies’ water resources management plans.

The preferred programme that Thames Water has set out for full consultation includes water transfers. I believe considerations will be made for desalination, and there are elements of water trading, with things such as Didcot power station. I understand that Thames Water considered more than 50 sites for a new large reservoir and considered that only one of those sites was viable. As I said, other water companies may be involved. It has been brought to my attention that Affinity Water is considering and working alongside Thames Water on this matter.

On demand reduction, targets are already set for water companies. I hope hon. Members are aware that planning regulations require a target of 125 litres per day for new developments, but councils can, in planning permissions, reduce that to 110 litres per day if the development is in a water-stressed area.
On the flood alleviation scheme in Oxford, I say gently to the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) that I recognise that people would like additional cycle paths and so on, but if the costs of the scheme have gone up, it is fundamental that taxpayers’ money needs to be spent on delivering the scheme. I am conscious that there may be other opportunities to develop the additional benefits to which she referred.

The good Feargal Sharkey is a friend of many people in Parliament. He used to be chief executive of UK Music, but now pushes passionately for chalk streams, to which the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas) in particular referred. He also mentioned the pollution challenges at Thames Water. He will be aware that Thames Water received a record fine after being prosecuted by the Environment Agency. This is exactly the kind of project we need to reduce the pressure on other sources of water. Although I am conscious of the scale of this reservoir, it appears at least to be a viable option. However, it needs to be considered carefully.

I appreciate that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) raised a number of issues. I hope that I have been able to cover Members’ key questions. Overall, I really hope that my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage sees that there are transparent and robust processes in place to ensure that water companies continue to provide reliable water supplies efficiently and economically, and that any plans that are put forward will be scrutinised appropriately and decided on objectively.

5.37 pm

Mr Vaizey: I am grateful for the chance to wind up the debate. I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response to the points I made and to those made by the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), by the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), and by our guest star, the hon. Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Jon Cruddas). I am not getting a rise out of him. That is very annoying. He is staring at me. I am being affectionate here.

This is the second time I have raised this very important issue in the House. I raised it last month in a Statutory Instrument Committee, and I will continue to raise it with Ministers in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. I am glad to see that the Department has such a comprehensive overview.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered plans for a Thames Water reservoir at Abingdon.

5.38 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Withdrawal Agreement: Economic Analyses

TREASURY COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.31 pm

Joan Ryan (in the Chair): We begin with the Select Committee statement. Nicky Morgan will speak on the publication of the 25th report of the Treasury Committee, “The UK’s economic relationship with the European Union: The Government’s and Bank of England’s Withdrawal Agreement analyses”, HC 1819, for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of the statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Nicky Morgan to respond to those in turn. Members can expect to be called only once, and questions should be brief. I call the Chair of the Treasury Committee.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for the opportunity to make a statement to the Chamber on the 25th report of the Treasury Committee on the economic impact of the withdrawal agreement and political declaration, and on the Bank of England’s analysis. I place on record my thanks to the Treasury Committee’s staff, my fellow members of the Committee, the witnesses who appeared before us, and all those who submitted written evidence—all of whom played a vital part in producing the report with great speed.

Over the summer, I wrote to the Chancellor, the Governor of the Bank of England and the Financial Conduct Authority on behalf of the Treasury Committee and asked them to produce and publish analysis of the economic impact of the Brexit withdrawal agreement and of the future framework, once it had been negotiated by the Government with the EU. The purpose of securing those analyses was to ensure that Parliament’s meaningful vote on the withdrawal agreement, whenever that may be, is properly informed. Like many other Select Committees, the Treasury Committee has spent the last few weeks poring over the details to ensure that all right hon. and hon. Members walk through the voting Lobbies with the best possible evidence.

When the analysis we requested was published a couple of weeks ago, there were accusations of “Project Fear Mark 2”. Some ramped up the rhetoric even further, with cries of “Project Hysteria”. Let me clear: the analysis of the withdrawal agreement published by the Treasury, the Bank of England and the FCA was requested by the Treasury Committee for Parliament. The timing of the publication was driven by us to ensure that there was enough time for evidence sessions on the analysis ahead of the vote as we then expected it. Any personal criticism of the Chancellor, the Governor of the Bank of England, our regulators or witnesses, all of whom were responding to parliamentary requests, is wholly unfair and does not aid constructive discussion of the issues—and they are important issues. The analysis that the Treasury Committee received helped it greatly in producing its report on the Brexit deal, which was published and sent to all Members of Parliament on Tuesday morning.

Although Committees can be divided along ideological, party and, more recently, Brexit lines, consensus is always sought. There are 11 Members of Parliament on the Treasury Committee, and I am sure that there are at least 12 different views on Brexit, but this report, like the other 24 reports that we have published since I became Chair 17 months ago, was unanimously agreed. That shows that while the House, and indeed the country, appears more divided than ever, compromise can be achieved. As I have told the House before, all hon. Members will have to compromise if we are to find a way through Brexit.

The firm aim of the report was not to recommend how Members of Parliament should vote, but to ensure that they are as informed as possible and as aware as possible of all the relevant evidence when it comes to choosing a Division Lobby. Unfortunately, the Government made this difficult to achieve. They provided economic analysis of the UK leaving the EU under five different scenarios. The White Paper scenario, which is akin to the Chequers proposal, represents the most optimistic reading of the political declaration, rather than a more realistic scenario. It does not represent the central or most likely outcome under the political declaration, and therefore cannot inform Parliament’s meaningful vote.

In the report, the Treasury Committee expresses its disappointment that the evidence provided by the Treasury does not analyse the backstop. The Treasury also failed to include any short-term analysis, including on public finances and on regional and sectoral job losses or gains. Members of Parliament, as representatives of their constituencies, will understand how important that regional analysis is now and in the future.

Specifically on the Government’s decision not to model the backstop, the Committee concluded that that was a mistake. The Governor of the Bank of England told us “on average for a trade deal from start to finish, it is something in the order of four years”; but we know that previous EU negotiations have taken longer—for example, the trade agreement between the EU and Canada took eight years. Even if the implementation period is extended for one or two years beyond December 2020, it is feasible that the UK could enter the backstop, which, as we know, is politically contentious, given what we have already heard in the withdrawal agreement debate. Despite it being neither the UK’s nor the EU’s preferred position, the Government should have modelled the backstop.

We as the Treasury Committee would not be doing our duty to the House of Commons if we did not look at the effects of the withdrawal agreement on the financial services sector. In each of the five modelled scenarios, the sector will contribute less to the UK economy, but...
we know that it is a critical taxpayer, as well as being part of presenting a face of global Britain on the world stage. The Financial Conduct Authority expressed its concern that the UK would be a rule taker during an implementation period. In assessing the financial services sector’s ability to withstand a no-deal Brexit, the Governor provided reassurance that the Bank of England is “sleeping soundly at night, because the core of the financial sector is in the position that it needs to be in for the tough scenario.”

While the Governor’s sleeping patterns may provide some succour to MPs, it is clear that a vacuum of information exists. There is a dearth of analysis that shows how the economy will transition to a new trading relationship. There is also a lack of modelling on the future framework between the UK and the EU.

However, Parliament may wish to draw from the range of scenarios that have been modelled, in order to assess the economic impact of the draft withdrawal agreement and political declaration. The scenarios range from 0.6% less GDP under the Chequers plan than would otherwise have been the case, to 7.7% less GDP in a no-deal scenario.

Select Committees play an increasingly important role in the life of this Parliament, particularly given its make-up and the nature of the Brexit issue that it faces. I was very clear, and I would like to thank the Committee’s members again for their support, in saying that we wanted to make sure that analysis and evidence were put before MPs. As I said, we wanted to do that not to tell them how to vote—we are all grown-ups and should be able to make decisions on behalf of our constituents as their representatives—but to make sure that the information was out there.

We know what happened earlier this week, which is that the meaningful vote was suspended and postponed. It will come back before the House at some point—maybe not until the new year. I suggest to the Minister here today—the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury—that that gives time for some of the issues that are identified in our report to be potentially remedied, or for more evidence to be given to the Committee, which we will report to the House, as we have done before.

In conclusion, whenever this vote comes back to the House, I hope, on behalf of the Treasury Committee, that all Members of Parliament will find time amid the turkey, crackers and festive wrappings to read our report before that Division bell rings.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. The Treasury Committee’s report is a damning read for those who had dared to hope that the Government’s withdrawal agreement analysis would enlighten the debate. We already knew that this Government’s Brexit was going to damage our economy; every piece of credible independent analysis has shown that, and the Government’s own analysis has shown it, too. As we see from the Committee’s report, the Government failed to provide all the evidence the Committee requested and “modelled scenarios...yet did not model scenarios that are considered probable and have the potential to be persistent over the medium to long term”.

What is worse, none of the Government’s economic analysis even attempts to give Members or our constituents accurate information about the things that matter most, which are jobs, incomes and prices over the next year. Put simply, the Committee has confirmed that the Government have failed to show leadership at this time of immense uncertainty and fear in our country.

I have just a couple of questions for the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), the Chair of the Treasury Committee. First, is it not true that none of the Government’s proposed options will be good for the economy, to the tune of at least a 4.9% hit? The Chancellor described that hit as being “slightly smaller”, but I must admit that a hit of more than 4% does not feel small to me. I would like the right hon. Lady’s view on that issue.

Secondly, as there is no analysis of what happens if we remain with the backstop, we can only conclude that the Government either do not know what the effects of that option are or that they do not want us to know what the effects are. Can the right hon. Lady enlighten us and say which of those she thinks is true?

Finally, given that the Bank of England considers that a no-deal scenario could be worse than the 2008 financial crisis, and given that the Government think that a no-deal scenario would cut as much as 11% from our economy, does the right hon. Lady agree that it is utterly irresponsible to threaten something that no responsible Government would ever consider allowing in their own country?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady for her questions, and it is good to have this debate—I am sure we would have had it on the Floor of the main Chamber if it had continued, but now we have time to reflect on all of this.

The hon. Lady is right to say that the first thing the Chancellor admitted—I think both publicly, when the analysis was first published, and before the Committee as well—was that none of the scenarios shows that there will not be a negative impact on the UK economy. A 4% hit is substantial, if we think about that figure in the context of the financial crisis, and we as MPs all know that many of our constituents still feel the effects of that financial crisis 10 years on. Wages are now growing, but it has taken some time for them to do so.

Another of the hon. Lady’s questions was in relation to no deal. I know the Minister will not answer now, but he will be more than capable of answering for himself at some point in the future. However, I have been a Treasury Minister myself, and to be fair to the Government, they have dropped the “No deal is better than a bad deal” language. Parliament has already made it very clear that we are not going to sign off on any kind of no-deal arrangement, although we all have to debate among ourselves how we will head that proposal off at the right time. It is very clear that the Government do not want there to be a no-deal scenario, and I am glad that the analysis has shown why a no-deal scenario would be so very damaging and why it is of such concern to businesses, importers, exporters and those employing our constituents.

The hon. Lady also asked about the backstop modelling. Members will see in the report and in the transcripts of our sittings that we asked all our witnesses and the economists who gave evidence whether it was possible to model a backstop. With any modelling, it is all about
the underlying assumptions. Some assumptions would have to be made about the way the backstop would operate and how long it would last. The Government told our Committee that, because they do not want to be in the backstop and because the backstop is not the preferred Government policy, it did not have to be modelled.

I think we all hope that that is the case and that the backstop is an insurance policy not to be called upon. Undoubtedly, however, on the basis of how long it takes to negotiate free trade agreements, there is a possibility that the backstop will be needed. That would then have an impact on those relying on importing to and exporting from this country. There is time now, and it might well be that this is something the Government Economic Service might want to consider, although its staff also deserve a Christmas. They might want to consider how they might give some more evidence to the House on this issue before we get to the meaningful vote.

**Ian Murray** (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady and her Committee for producing this report, which could be summed up in one sentence: Brexit makes the country and every one of our constituents poorer. We see that when we get to the conclusions.

However, my question is about financial services. I have tens of thousands of financial services jobs in my constituency, and under all the models examined in the Treasury Committee’s report, the financial services industry shrinks, by anything between 9% and slightly less than 1%. That would have a disproportionate impact on Edinburgh, because of the way its financial services sector is set up. Was any modelling done on how many jobs would be lost and on what the Government need to do between now and 29 March next year to put in place a system, mechanism or part of a deal that would mean that the financial services industry would not shrink but, indeed, grow?

**Nicky Morgan** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for his question. The financial services sector now talks about “day one” and “day two” impacts. As for day one, we know that a lot of financial services firms are already putting in place contingency arrangements and that they are trying to keep job moves to a minimum. Depending on the deal that is eventually arrived at—this relates to the hon. Gentleman’s question about what deal could be put in place to help this process—the impacts of “day two” and beyond on jobs being lost or moved could be very significant for the financial services sector. Obviously, we could be talking about thousands of jobs. These are jobs that are well-paid, and they are not something that any of us here today want to see disappearing from our constituencies.

Let me answer the hon. Gentleman’s question, though, which is actually about the deal on the table at the moment. The political declaration refers to a system of equivalence, but a lot of work needs to be done to work out the equivalence regime. Andrew Bailey, the chief executive of the Financial Conduct Authority, went through with our Committee how he thought the equivalence regime needs to be enhanced, and I think he is right on that issue.

I do not think it is any great secret for Members of this House that I am in favour of a Norway-plus type of option, whereby we would retain access to the single market. I know that there are other objections to that proposal, but for financial services it would keep the passporting regime in place, which would be of significant benefit to financial services firms, and therefore in terms of the numbers of people they can employ going forward.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): I join in thanking my right hon. Friend and her Committee for the work they have done, together with their advisers and the witnesses. In conclusion 6, there is a reference to the backstop, which leads to paragraphs 35 to 40 in the report. There, Professor Nickell says that it is possible to model the backstop, and then says that the backstop might be in place for 15 years. I do not think that is a very serious kind of modelling to do, because we do not know what change there would be. Am I right in saying that, unlike most trade agreements, the ones we will need to make with the EU27 are based on equivalence now, rather than trying to bring people together?

**Nicky Morgan**: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. Of course, one of the issues is that it is not known how long the backstop might be needed for. One would hope that 15 years is probably a wild overestimate, but it is true that the Canadian-European trade agreement took eight years; however, as my hon. Friend says, they were starting from a very different position from the UK and the EU, given the trading relationship that we have at the moment and very much want to maintain.

My understanding, which I think comes from evidence that the Secretary of State for International Trade gave to the relevant Select Committee and to the Exiting the European Union Committee, is that significant progress has been made in rolling over existing trade agreements. It is not just the new trade agreement with the EU that has to be negotiated; the UK then needs to separate out, and become a party to, the trade agreements the EU has with other countries. Progress has been made on that.

However, my hon. Friend is right: the point about modelling the backstop is not that it is impossible, but that it is possible, with very clear explanations of how it
Protection for Homebuyers

1.51 pm

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered protection for homebuyers.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms Ryan. I start by expressing my thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this debate; to Paula Higgins from the HomeOwners Alliance, and Emma Thomas and Steve Turner from the Home Builders Federation, who took the time to brief me; to the House of Commons digital team, which facilitated a digital debate on the subject earlier this week, in which hundreds of members of the public participated; and especially to the many individuals up and down the country who have been in touch with me to share their experience of buying a new home, particularly my constituents Lisa, Mike, Denise and Deepak. I also thank the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury—for listening to the introduction of this debate, at least. I hope he will find our discussion to be of interest.

I am sorry to say that the experiences that homebuyers have related to me are not happy ones. I regret that I cannot mention every individual case that has been conveyed to me, but I will do my best to reflect the wide range of issues raised, in relation to both the defects that homebuyers too frequently encounter when they move into a new-build home and the poor customer service that follows when they try to have those defects rectified. Of course, everyone expects to find snags in a new house, but I was pretty shocked that Shelter reported that more than half those surveyed in a YouGov survey in 2017 said that they had experienced some, or a lot of, major problems with their new home, and some of those problems were frankly dangerous.

In Woodsend in my constituency, residents moving into new Persimmon homes experienced a toilet that was flushing boiling water; a toilet that did not flush; dripping from the loft; holes in the walls; skirting boards that needed replacing; problems with light fittings; a front door that could not be closed; and a whole host of other problems. From across the country, I have heard reports of waste water from a lavatory not being connected to flow into the sewerage system, and gathering underneath the house; uneven floors; exposed nails; unfinished electrics; waterlogged gardens; issues with insulation; and problems with sinks, walls and fixtures.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this welcome debate before the House. Bellway Homes built homes in my constituency in 1988, and there is a suspicion that the gas installation did not meet the 1988 gas regulations. Residents have been fighting Bellway since, and the matter has now come to a head: the company has put its lawyers on to the question of whether it should comply with those regulations, despite the gas safety advisors saying that the homes do not meet the regulations.

Should we be highlighting these issues more often, and saying to people who are purchasing these homes that they require a much greater level of protection, either from Government or from insurance, to make sure they are covered for not just a few years but for decades into the future?
Kate Green: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. The issues of protections through statute and of information to purchasers will be among the many points that I hope to draw to the Minister’s attention during the remainder of my speech.

A couple of weeks ago, the BBC’s “5 live Investigates” reported on the shocking experience of a couple who had moved into a new Bovis home in Worcestershire. During that programme, homebuyer Craig read out a list of a staggering 354 defects in their new house. Last week, the “Victoria Derbyshire” programme reported on homebuyers who found that the mortar in the walls of their new Barratt and Taylor Wimpey homes was crumbling. Buyers report that once they have decided to buy a house, they are placed under considerable pressure to complete the purchase speedily, so that the developer is paid and managers meet their sales targets. Quality is clearly being compromised as a result of those pressures.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): The pressure that buyers are put under to conclude purchases quickly is something I hope to talk about later on. Is my hon. Friend aware of issues with developers insisting that particular solicitors complete the transactions?

Kate Green: Indeed I am, and that too is a point to which I hope to return in the course of my remarks.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I apologise for not being able to stay for at least the middle part of the debate, because of another parliamentary duty. Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the consequences of this debate and those BBC programmes is that publicity attaches to the builders? It would be a good idea for there to be some forum that other media could look at, so that the names of the builders that manage to build homes without defects or correct them quickly get praised, and those that do not get damned.

Kate Green: The hon. Gentleman has raised an important point about the impact on the reputation of the whole industry. Although some of the builders involved are household names, it is important to recognise that, as I have heard, some smaller local builders are implicated in delivering poor-quality build, whereas others meet a very high standard of both build and customer service. However, too often, it is the large developers—whose reputation people will be familiar with, and in which buyers might reasonably feel they could place some trust—that are letting their customers down so badly.

I will put on the record a few of the other major household names that I have heard mentioned, as although I will be talking about my constituents’ experience with Persimmon Homes, Persimmon is far from being the only offender. I have also heard about problems with Bovis Homes, which my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) mentioned; Harron Homes; Charles Church, which is an arm of Persimmon; Linden Homes; David Wilson Homes; and Keepmoat Homes. It is entirely possible that colleagues will add to that list in the course of our discussion.

The problems of defects are compounded by the appalling customer service, and sometimes outright bullying, that homebuyers experience when they attempt to have defects remedied. My constituents in Woodsend began complaining about their new homes many months ago. Lisa tells me that she waited a year and a half before Persimmon even gave her a named customer service contact, although the company did find time in that period to pay its then chief executive a £75 million bonus. I wrote to the company on Lisa and her neighbours’ behalf earlier this year and was staggered to be told that it was not Persimmon’s policy to deal with MPs. However, it was not dealing with or responding to the homebuyers either. I think the House will agree that that is truly shoddy and reflects systemic problems that are incumbent on Government to sort out.

Buying a house is the biggest, most important purchase most of us will ever make. People work hard and save up for their dream home, but too often instead they are suffering huge cost, stress and inconvenience.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing such an important debate to the House. I want to add something about the frustration that her constituents feel, especially with Persimmon Homes. A constituent of mine said:

“Unfortunately, we have had nothing but continuous issues since we moved in. What should have been one of the happiest times for us has been plagued by bad workmanship and appalling communication and customer service.”

They expressed to me that it had had such an impact on their life at what should be a happy time. Does she agree that it is a life-changing moment and that bad house builders are causing such distress to constituents?

Kate Green: I absolutely agree. In fact, my hon. Friend’s constituents have been posting on Facebook about some of their experiences with Persimmon, which echo those of my constituents. She makes an important point about the impact these things have on people’s emotional wellbeing. Some of the homebuyers who have contacted me in recent weeks have talked about being forced to take time off work because of mental health problems created by the stress they are experiencing.

As my hon. Friend said, buying a new house is a life-changing moment for many people. In and of itself, it is a big, emotional, stressful experience and is often accompanied by other big life changes, such as leaving the family home for the first time or an enlargement to the family. It is important to acknowledge that that stress is significant, often lasts for a protracted period of time and is exacerbated by the reluctance of developers to engage with people’s problems.

Despite all that, house purchase is one of the areas of consumer law that is least protected in consumer legislation. Property is exempt from the Sale and Supply of Goods Act 1994, meaning that if it fails to live up to expectations, there is no right to reject it and demand a refund. The role of building control inspectors is to ensure that technical standards are met. They are not responsible for monitoring build quality.

What is more, the person carrying out the work—in other words, the developer—has the choice of which building control body to use to carry out the inspection. A confusing landscape of codes of practice, warranty schemes and even, as was reported on the “Victoria Derbyshire” programme, attempts to gag buyers from going public leave people at the mercy of the developers and warranty companies. All in all, as the HomeOwners Alliance says, people get less protection when buying a house than they do when buying a toaster.
What needs to change? The all-party parliamentary group for excellence in the built environment made a series of recommendations—I know the Minister will be familiar with them—in an extremely well researched and comprehensive report in 2016. Earlier this year, the Government undertook a much-needed public consultation on strengthening rights and protections for homebuyers. I welcome those initiatives, and I am glad the Government have indicated their support for the introduction of a new homes ombudsman, but there is no detail as yet or timescale for implementing that.

In the meantime, the multiplicity of codes, warranties and complaints systems makes things very complicated and slow for homebuyers. The Home Builders Federation told me that it is working on a series of industry-wide reforms, including preparing for the introduction of an ombudsman scheme, a standard sales contract, a single code of practice and a minimum set of warranty standards. It hopes to work with mortgage providers so that compliance would be required for a purchaser to obtain a mortgage. That is all well and good, but I just do not think people will be reassured simply by a voluntary, industry-led approach. The Government need to be much more precise and prescriptive.

The Home Owners Alliance and the all-party group have called for a number of measures that would significantly help to improve the situation for homebuyers. In her response, I hope the Minister will specifically address those suggestions.

The Home Owners Alliance and the all-party group propose a right for homebuyers to inspect their new home before moving in, without prejudice and with the right to bring their own surveyor or snagger. Builders selling their properties off plan will often refuse to let buyers inspect the property before they take the keys. That practice is unacceptable and should be ended. Standardised contracts should include the full plan and specification as standard, rather than them being hidden away in an office. The contracts must include standardised terms and have more detailed specification so that builders cannot swap for cheaper materials. Consumer groups should be involved in the development of those contracts, otherwise the fear is that they will continue to be stacked in favour of the developer.

A focus on quality is much needed across the sector through the adoption of International Organisation for Standardisation standards. A review of the inspection and warranty regimes is required to give consumers reassurance that buildings meet standards set by Government and greater clarity about what is covered. Buyers believe their warranties will protect them for up to 10 years, but after the first two years, warranties typically cover only serious structural defects. Again and again in preparing for this debate, I heard reports of warranty companies refusing to take responsibility for sorting problems.

We also need minimum standards for compliance inspections. A single homebuyers code should replace the many different codes, which are so confusing for homeowners. The new ombudsman, funded by the industry—I think that is the Government’s intention—should be the guardian of the code. It should cover after-sales service as well as the quality of the building work.

Developers should not be able to recommend individual solicitors. That point was raised a few moments ago by my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders). Solicitors should be working for the homebuyer, but if they get most of their business via the developer, that naturally creates a conflict of interest.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am pleased that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. Does she not think that it might be an idea for the Law Society to look into the behaviour of solicitors who put themselves in the position of having that serious conflict of interest, which is so detrimental to our constituents?

Kate Green: I absolutely agree, and I hope the Law Society will take note of that suggestion.

The final suggestion for improvement and reform is for prospective homebuyers to have more up-front information about the property they are purchasing, including whether properties are leasehold or freehold and the implications of buying leasehold property. We have all heard reports of rip-off service charges and ground rents that rise every year affecting leaseholders in our constituencies. The Government need to act to address that scandal. There should be a standardised key facts document, as there is in financial services, such as for mortgages. Also, better information needs to be handed to the consumer once the property has been completed. I hope that the Minister will respond in detail to those suggestions.

Before I conclude, I should say that no debate in this House right now would be complete without a reference to Brexit. Fundamentally, the problems I have described come down to corporate greed, but they have been exacerbated by pressure to build the new homes needed to meet Government targets, which the construction industry is struggling to cope with. Poor quality workmanship has been attributed in part to being forced to rely on inexperienced, unqualified labour.

The Construction Industry Training Board tells me that, in response to the shortage of skilled workers, many developers are relying on EU workers to fill gaps in their sector, including electricians, carpenters and bricklayers. Those are skilled trades, and investment in upskilling the domestic workforce to meet demand is imperative. However, we were simply to turn off the tap on EU labour, the pressures that the industry faces would only increase.

We are still waiting for the Government’s immigration White Paper, although I was pleased to hear the Leader of the House promise in business questions this morning that we would see it next week. There are particular worries in this sector, not least because of the reliance on self-employed labour, yet there is a real lack of information about how the Government’s post-Brexit immigration system will work for self-employed workers.

Will there, for example, be the possibility of third-party sponsorship schemes to enable such skilled tradespeople to continue to come in and provide labour in our construction sector? I urge the Minister to press her
Home Office colleagues to ensure that the immigration policy that it introduces meets the needs of this crucial sector.

This House cannot sit by while so many of our constituents face such great cost, stress and disappointment when making such a significant investment. The industry needs to get its house in order, and the Government have a responsibility to ensure that it does so. The Minister must tell us exactly what steps she will take to protect our constituents from seeing their dream home become a nightmare. I look forward to her response.

2.12 pm

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms Ryan, presiding over the debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) both on securing this important debate and on her excellent opening speech, which covered so much ground. I am grateful to the House of Commons Library and to the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership for their briefings. I will focus on two points: leaseholder tenure, which my hon. Friend mentioned, and, briefly, fire sprinklers.

I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform with the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey). It is good to see our estimable vice-chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), in the Chamber.

Governments of both persuasions have recognised that homebuyers are vulnerable to purchasing a property that does not meet their expectations. The Tories legislated in this area in 1986 and 1993, and Labour did more in 2002. Despite incremental increases in protection, the Government recognise that more needs to be done. As a result, the Prime Minister, and successive Secretaries of State and Housing Ministers, have been making promises on ground rents, the conduct of property management companies, the right to manage, dispute resolution and commonhold. We have had various statements—written and oral—a White Paper, calls for evidence and consultations. The Law Commission has been tasked with a major review of the law and is on the case.

The first anomaly comes with the purchase of the property. I say “purchase”, but as the Library briefing lists a range of potential problems, 250 years or 999 years. That is quite a range. The Leasehold Advisory Service, the Government-funded advisory body known as LEASE, found that 57% of leaseholders regretted buying a leasehold property. That is quite a contrast.

LEASE has come in for quite a bit of criticism for not doing enough for leaseholders. When Mr Gavin Barwell was Housing Minister, he stated that LEASE should be the leaseholders’ champion, but LEASE still has a remit for freeholders and developers. That looks like a conflict of interest, and I would be grateful if the Minister would give her view of where LEASE sits within the legislative framework.

There is no doubt that some leaseholders are perfectly happy with their homes. However, many are not. The duration of leases can be anything from 99 years, 125 years, 250 years or 999 years. That is quite a range. The Library briefing lists a range of potential problems, some of which were mentioned by my hon. Friend. They include high service charges and a lack of transparency over what people are being charged for; freeholders blocking attempts by leaseholders to exercise their right to manage; excessive costs for building insurance; administration charges; applications to extend lease agreements; and event fees.

I was contacted by a group of leaseholders in my constituency only last night, on the Aberfeldy village estate, complaining that their property management company, Rendall and Rittner, had raised service charges in 2016-17 by 12%, and this year by 6% in a new estate. Residents are also complaining about the poor service for the significant charges that they are paying—nearly £3,000 per year. The Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, the campaigning charity in this area, and the all-party parliamentary group secretariat, run by Martin Boyd and Sebastian O’Kelly, ably assisted by Ms Katherine O’Riordan, have been lobbying the Government on those matters for years.

One of their notable successes early on was getting the Department for Communities and Local Government—now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—to revise the figures for leasehold properties. The Department was working on the basis of 2.3 million properties for a number of years. LKP persuaded it eventually that there were many more, and the Ministry now uses the figure of 4.3 million. However, LKP calculates that there are more than 6 million such properties, and the all-party parliamentary group knows which figures we think are likely to be more accurate.

The Select Committee on Housing, Communities and Local Government is in the middle of an inquiry, the conclusions and recommendations of which are keenly anticipated by the sector. There is strong pressure to regulate the sector in respect of property management companies. Some are trying to do a professional job and are observing their own voluntary standards in the meantime—many are members of the Association of Residential Managing Agents. However, many others need regulation that requires them to perform to professional standards. Lord Best has been leading a working group developing a regulatory regime, which the Government have committed to introduce.

Helen Goodman: Does my hon. Friend not agree that it sounds as though there has been some serious mis-selling, and the Minister ought to refer it to the Financial Conduct Authority?
Jim Fitzpatrick: There are certainly anomalies in the whole system. I think that there are more problems with the actual tenure of leaseholds, which makes buyers vulnerable to a range of things. Developers and freeholders then abuse the power and privilege that they have. Whether that is a matter for the FCA or not is another matter. The Minister might want to comment on that when responding.

My last point about leasehold relates to cladding. After the tragedy of the Grenfell fire, and following a major review of high-rise properties across the country, many blocks were found to be at risk. It is welcome that the Government set aside £400 million for councils and housing associations in the public sector to remove and replace defective cladding in homes and carry out remedial work. However, in the private sector the Government have restricted themselves to encouraging and exhorting freeholders and developers to do the honourable thing and accept the costs. Sadly, that has not worked in all cases. More troublingly, where it is not working, in blocks such as New Providence Wharf in my constituency, companies such as Ballymore are passing the costs on to leaseholders simply because they legally can.

In some buildings, the National House Building Council 10-year warranty has provided protection, as it has in New Festival Quarter in my constituency. Along with the positive decision by Bellway that has already been referred to, that stands in stark contrast to Ballymore. These costs run into millions; most of the residents of these flats are young professionals who are mortgaged up to the hilt, with no capacity for additional borrowing even if they wanted that option.

On 29 November, the Secretary of State published a written statement on the matter, in which he stated: “I am...writing to local authorities with buildings where the owner refuses to remediate unsafe ACM cladding, to offer them our full support to take enforcement action. This will include financial support where this is necessary for the local authority to carry out emergency remedial work. Where financial support is provided, local authorities will recover the costs from the building owner. I am determined that building owners will not evade their responsibilities and that local authorities will have all the support they need to ensure that all high-rise buildings with unsafe ACM cladding are made permanently safe for the people who live in them.” [Official Report, 29 November 2018; Vol. 650, c. 18WS.] Further to that statement, I submitted a written question asking “what legal powers local authorities have to recover costs.”

The Minister for Housing answered: “The Housing Act 2004 allows local authorities to take enforcement action... If local authorities need to take emergency remedial action but are unable to fund this work up front, we will consider requests for funding which would be repaid once the local authorities recover the costs from the building owner.” I would be grateful if the present Minister confirmed, first, whether the 2004 Act is the relevant legislation, secondly which section of the Act can applied—perhaps her officials could highlight it for us—and thirdly how much money is being set aside for such contingencies.

Most of what I have to say about tenure relates to points that I have raised before, but I make no apology for raising them again because they still need to be pressed. The Government’s work programme is very welcome, but we want to see it reach a conclusion.

My final point, which is somewhat connected, is about fire protection and the use of fire sprinklers. The Scottish Government are legislating for fire sprinklers in houses in multiple occupation, following a private Member’s Bill, the proposed Social Housing (Automatic Fire Suppression Systems) (Scotland) Bill. The Welsh Assembly has passed building regulations to require an automatic fire suppression to be introduced into new and converted homes, which is due principally to my former Fire Brigades Union colleague, Ann Jones AM. Wales was the first country in the world to pass such legislation: the Building Regulations &c. (Amendment No. 3) and Domestic Fire Safety (Wales) Regulations 2013, which came into effect on 1 January 2016.

In its ninth report of 2017-19, published on 18 July 2018, the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee recommended:

“Where structurally feasible, sprinklers should be retro-fitted to existing high-rise residential buildings to provide an extra layer of safety for residents. The Government should make funding available to fit sprinklers into council and housing association-owned residential buildings above 18 metres, and issue guidance to that effect to building owners in the private sector.”

I would be grateful if the Minister updated us on where the Government stand on the installation of fire sprinklers in homes for vulnerable people, HMOs, buildings above 18 metres and high-rises above 30 metres, and gave us the latest news on sprinkler retrofitting.

There is much more fire protection work that can be done to protect people. The Government are moving towards better protection for people who have leasehold tenure, but that protection cannot come quickly enough. I look forward to the speeches of the Front-Bench spokespersons, especially that of my fellow West Ham United supporter, the Minister.

2.25 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing this important debate. I would like to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) in speaking about leasehold issues that relate to the protection of homebuyers.

An estimated 12.4% of homes sold in Washington and Sunderland West were sold as leasehold in 2016. I realise that my constituency does not have the largest number of leasehold homes—certainly not as many as the constituencies of some of my hon. Friends—but the issue is still important to my constituents. That is why I recently began a consultation on leasehold homes in which I asked constituents to get in touch with me about their experiences. I only launched the campaign three weeks ago, but 30 constituents have already written to me with their concerns, in some cases in detail. I do not have time to go into the details of each, but I would like to share the themes that have become apparent from their emails.
Most homebuyers were not aware what a leasehold was when they purchased their home. There is a serious lack of knowledge about what leasehold and freehold are. I feel that developers have a duty to inform prospective buyers about the difference between the two and what it means for them. As we have heard, solicitors also have a part to play. It makes a person wonder who they act on behalf of—the buyer or the developer—especially when the developer includes free conveyancing as part of the sale. Solicitors should always act in the best interest of their client, who in this case should be the buyer, not the developer. I have to agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), who is not in her place at the moment, that this abuse should be referred to the Law Society. I hope that the Minister will make that recommendation; I am sure it is in her power to refer dodgy solicitors to the Law Society.

Does the Minister agree that if we are to protect homebuyers, we should educate them to know the difference between leasehold and freehold so that they can make the best decision for themselves and their families? That should certainly be the case for first-time buyers, and financial education lessons in schools have an important part to play in achieving that.

Notwithstanding the issue of educating the population as a whole, there should be complete transparency from very early on in the sale about whether the property is leasehold and what that means. Two of my constituents have told me that they were not informed that their property was leasehold until the very day of signing the contract. Another has told me that they were not aware that their property was leasehold until nearly 15 years after the original purchase—probably when they tried to make alterations or build an extension. Because of the lack of knowledge about leaseholds and the lack of information available to homebuyers, there is a lot of confusion and variation when it comes to buying the freehold.

Many leaseholders were told that they could purchase the freehold at a later date, perhaps when they had saved enough money. However, when some constituents inquired about purchasing the freehold, they found that the goalposts had moved and the price was much further out of reach than they had expected. Some have even been informed that the freehold is now not for sale—in some cases because it has been sold to a third-party company without the leaseholder's knowledge.

Not only is the cost of buying the freehold out of reach for some of my constituents; so is the cost of ground rent, which can increase year on year. Then there are the admin fees that homeowners have to pay when asking the freeholder's permission to make changes to their own property. One of my constituents was charged £400 by the freeholder to build a conservatory to their own property. Another constituent expressed great frustration that they are charged £100 for a yes or a no. It can sometimes take more than eight weeks to hear back on whether that is a yes or a no.

I know that some leaseholders out there listening will now be horrified and will be deterred from making queries to the freeholder, for fear of being charged some of these exorbitant fees. Too many leaseholders are locked into a state of being regularly over charged by freeholders, being unable to afford their ever-increasing ground rent, or never being able to afford to buy their freehold due it to being linked to some sort of escalator that was hidden in the small print of the contract, which their solicitor never pointed out to them. I share the concerns of my constituents who feel like they have been ripped off by leasehold contracts and I call on the Government to launch an inquiry into the scandal as soon as possible.

2.30 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing this extremely important debate and on the way she managed to cover a whole range of issues. There are many aspects to this issue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) said, I am vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform. I pay tribute to him and the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) for the work they have done, ably aided by the Leasehold Knowledge Partnership, in raising the many issues in many debates here.

The title of the debate is “Protection for Homebuyers”. The truth, as we have heard, is that there is little protection, if any. We have a system based on the historic principle of caveat emptor—buyer beware—which is a principle I often hear quoted back at me when I raise concerns about some of the more insidious practices developers have adopted over recent years. Buyers should beware, because caveat emptor relies on a buyer and a seller having equal bargaining power, and that is simply not the reality in 2018. We have a huge shortage of housing, there are significant barriers for buyers in getting on the housing ladder and there are a handful of huge companies responsible for the vast majority of housing delivery.

The situation has been exacerbated by the Help to Buy equity loan scheme, which offered support to first-time buyers for new-build homes only. That led to an effective monopoly being held by some developers. If someone wanted to purchase their first home in the area where they grew up, the only choice would have been to visit the sales office of an individual supplier.

Kate Green: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just individual homebuyers who are being ripped off by some developers, but the taxpayer, because it is public money, through the Government’s Help to Buy scheme, that is helping to boost their profits?

Justin Madders: I absolutely agree. The reliance on this small group of developers has been a very poor deal for the taxpayer, and it is against that backdrop that the leasehold scandal has emerged. Once-trusted household names such as Bellway, Persimmon, Redrow, Taylor Wimpey and Countrywide acted in, I believe, a deliberate way to exploit the circumstances and rip off thousands of people around the country—and the taxpayer, in the process.

For no other reason than profiteering, houses in many areas gradually began to be sold on a leasehold rather than a freehold basis. Punitive permission fees—where a leaseholder is forced to pay a significant sum for everything from putting up a shed to changing a carpet—were hidden in the small print of the leases.
[Justin Madders]

Service or maintenance charges were then added, charging leaseholders for the same services that they are already paying council tax for. If that was not enough, the developers then added onerous clauses, causing the ground rent in many cases to periodically double, taking them from an initial modest sum to thousands of pounds after a few decades, rendering the properties unmortgageable and unsellable in the future. The ground rent is, of course, being levied for absolutely nothing in return.

When purchasers query the leases on the properties, they are offered a range of scripted reassurances, being told that the properties are “virtually freehold” and that they would have first refusal to buy out the lease. In almost every case, the lease is then sold without the knowledge of the person actually living in the home, to become an income stream for a network of opaque investment companies. People are then told they can purchase the freehold of their own home only if they are prepared to offer tens of thousands of pounds.

As we have heard, purchases of these properties take place in an extremely tight and completely artificial timescale, imposed by the developer through a hard-sell approach. To compound the unequal relationship between the parties to the transaction, a variety of pressure and incentives are used by developers to encourage the use of a solicitor on their own panel. While the solicitor of course has a duty to act in the interests of the purchaser, the reality is that when hundreds of cases are being provided by the developer, that independence is inevitably put under some strain.

My constituent, Katie Kendrick, has helped to lead an incredible campaign on behalf of leaseholders around the country against this scandal, and I pay tribute to her for everything she has done to bring it to the attention of the public. Her own case is a textbook example of the kind of issues we have talked about. In July 2014, with her husband, she bought what transpired to be the only lease to her home from Bellway, a company with a revenue of more than £2.5 billion last year. It was bought through the Help to Buy scheme, and they had only 28 days to complete the purchase following payment of the £500 deposit to reserve the plot. Because of this developer-imposed and completely arbitrary timeframe, Katie and her husband were pressured into using the Bellway-recommended solicitors.

They were informed during the process that, after two years, they would have the right to buy their freehold without any problems and that it would cost in the region of £2,000 to £4,000. Less than two years later, in February 2016, they received notification that the freehold to their home had been unilaterally sold to Adriatic Land 4 (GR1) Ltd. When they inquired whether they could purchase the freehold, they were quoted an amount of £13,350.

I have concluded that Katie’s experience was deliberately manufactured, because it is simply not feasible for the exact same actions to have become standard practice across a range of developers throughout the country. If this situation, as I believe, was deliberately manufactured to exploit thousands of people up and down the country, what is the Minister going to do about it?

If the situation is so serious and inequitable that it should be banned from ever occurring in the future, as is the Government’s apparent policy, how can she justify taking no action to help those people who have already been affected? What examination has been undertaken of the Government’s role in the leasehold scandal? Does she accept that Help to Buy—a scheme created with good intentions—not only helped to create a monopoly position that was exploited, but has also subsidised the perpetrators? What is going to be done about that?

The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee investigation into these issues is extremely welcome, and I would urge anyone who has not yet done so to look at the evidence provided to date. Some of the responses from developers are completely incredible, in the literal sense. All the developers were unanimous in their support for ending the leasehold scheme that they have already inflicted on thousands of people around the country. Taylor Wimpey told the Committee that when the doubling ground rent issue “came to our attention...we made a very quick decision to convert the homes that we sell to freehold.”

That implies that until that point they were unaware of the basis on which they were selling their homes.

When Bellway was asked why it sold the freehold off to a third party rather than to the people actually living in the property, their chief executive, Jason Honeyman, replied:

“It is how we have always operated as a business. I am sure that is not the answer you want.”

A member of the Committee pressed him further on this point:

“I am asking why your customers do not get the chance to exercise the opportunity to buy their freehold. You are selling the freehold out from under them without their knowledge.”

His response was simply:

“Yes, we are.”

We know from many Bellway customers that they were specifically told by the sales staff they would be able to buy the freehold, yet here is the chief executive admitting that they have always sold them on to third parties. That, more than anything, shows that when I first called this scandal the payment protection insurance of the housebuilding industry, I was right to do so.

Although the initial response to this emerging scandal from the Government was the right one and was positively received by leaseholders, there is a huge amount of frustration at what are perceived as broken promises. Leasehold houses are no longer to be completely banned, as was promised by the Government. Ground rents will not be reduced to a peppercorn, but to £10, which creates an asset and again amounts to a broken promise by the Government. Will the Minister explain why there has been this backtrack from removing ground rents altogether to having a minimum cost? For all those people already trapped in leasehold properties more than two years on from the scandal coming to public attention, we have little more than warm words from the Government, and no action.

One of the reasons for people’s anger is that, although obscene bonuses have been awarded to Persimmon executives, the bulk of the profits have come from the taxpayer through the Help to Buy scheme. The Government need to accept that they are not simply a bystander, but a financier of the scandal. They cannot simply watch from the sidelines as our constituents continue to be ripped off while a handful of predators generate profits. It cannot be right that the companies that are guilty of
this industrial-scale rip-off are the very same ones that we will end up relying on to get us out of the country’s very real, very damaging housing crisis. There seems to be an over-reliance on the market to deliver the new homes that we desperately need. I have seen very little evidence to suggest that developers will act responsibly.

As the leasehold scandal shows, developers have become ever more adept at squeezing cash out of homeowners. Another way of doing that is through the provision of grounds maintenance and other communal services. It seems that the idea of the developer paying the local authority a commuted sum to cut the grass and maintain common paths has had its day. I am not clear whether the blame for that lies with local authorities for asking for too much or with developers that are not prepared to cough up enough funds in advance. I am sure they will always blame each other. The net effect is that more and more homeowners now have, in effect, to pay twice for the maintenance of open spaces—one through the management fee and once through their council tax.

Of course, council tax pays for lots of things, but something as visible and obvious as grounds maintenance leads people to ask why they face a double-whammy. My suspicion is that developers will always be tempted to save themselves the expense of an up-front payment to the local authority by letting their customers pay further down the line long after they have fled the scene. It is not only a double payment; it is also inefficient and lacks accountability. If the grass is not cut on the verges in most parts of my constituency, either I or a local councillor will hear about it and respond. It is not that easy to get a response from a management company.

I want to say a few words about the difficulty in getting developers to comply with their legal obligations once they have completed the bulk of the work. Yet again, the name Bellway crops up. Although it finished building the properties on an estate several years ago, the roads have yet to be adopted by the local authority, because they are not yet up to highway standards. Years of wrangling and paperwork followed the work. We all know about the significant cuts in funding that local authorities have experienced, and yet they have to waste their precious resources chasing developers that are reluctant to face up to their responsibilities.

Another example of that in my constituency is in the Mostyn House development in Parkgate. Originally, it was a boarding school in a listed building. Once the school shut, the site was an attractive one for developers. It is now an impressive mix of new builds and apartments woven into the fabric of the old school, but it suffers from one major disadvantage: although some people have lived there for five years, it still does not have planning permission. The reason for that is that the revised plans were submitted halfway through the redevelopment. Despite the best efforts of the local authority enforcement officers, the developer, PJ Livesey, continually dragged its heels, and as a result there is still an outstanding long list of works.

Our Front-Bench spokesman, the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn), is not someone who goes around fishing for compliments, but she and the shadow housing team are very engaged on these issues. I hope they continue to develop a full suite of important policies that will tackle many of the injustices we have heard about.

The net effect of all this is that there is no protection for homeowners. Once the developers have left town, they show little interest in keeping to their legal responsibilities. Worse, they continue to market their properties as a revenue stream for third parties.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston said earlier, why can we not have a retention scheme for snagging? Part of the purchase price could be held by an independent third party, only to be released when everyone was satisfied that things had been resolved. We do that with deposits for tenancies, and we are talking about something much more significant—sometimes a once-in-a-lifetime investment. People deserve more protection than they currently get. The cowboys in the developer sector need to be consigned to the history books.

2.43 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Ryan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on securing this debate and on the eloquent way in which she set out her case. She and other hon. Members showed that there is a major problem, and I hope the Minister will address it in her remarks.

When my hon. Friend said that she was seeking a debate on this issue, I immediately said, “I would love to be part of that debate,” because for the past eight or nine years I have been having problems with house builders in my constituency. I have been most struck by the fact that, of all the casework I deal with, they are the most difficult group to get a response from.

My hon. Friend said that Persimmon has a policy of not dealing with Members of Parliament, and that is certainly my experience. Despite numerous letters and telephone calls, it was only when I sent it a message saying that I was about to stand up in Parliament and make very derogatory remarks about its failure to respond that I even got the courtesy of a letter. It then took many months to get a meeting—I got one after, I think, five years of trying. That part of the house building community really needs to sort itself out.

We have heard a lot about the leasehold scandal. We have heard about snagging with new properties, and homeowners’ problems in getting that sorted out. I want to talk about two issues that have been a problem for me in my constituency. As a background, I should say that Hull is one of the most successful Help to Buy areas of the country. Lots of my constituents have scrimped and saved to get together the money to buy their home, and they are really proud that they have been able to do that. They are then faced with developers who, once the house has been sold, seemingly wash their hands and think they have no responsibility for sorting out the problems they have left behind. My constituents are left high and dry.

I want to give two examples. The first involves Harron Homes and Persimmon Homes, which developed a housing estate around Whisperwood Way in my constituency. The estate was completed in about 2007, but it took me and the residents four years of campaigning to get the road surfaced by the developers and adopted by the local authority. Of course, that should have been done before the residents moved in. It was unsafe, it
damaged people’s cars and it was dangerous to children and the elderly. There were also problems with Yorkshire Water completing the sewerage works. Harron Homes dragged its feet to get the road surfaced.

It is clear that developers, utilities and, in some cases, local authorities, should have stronger responsibilities placed on them to ensure that issues such as that do not drag on for four years. The residents have to pay their council tax, their water rate bills and everything else, but there is seemingly no mechanism to ensure that the problems they face are dealt with.

While all that was happening, I was approached by some more residents from Whisperwood Way. They came to me because they had moved into properties in Leadhills Way that were built right up to the edge of the Sutton Cross drain. Those families told me that their homes had been built by Persimmon in 2006, and they were having two problems. The first was that the homes were built too close to the drain, which caused their gardens to sink and their fences to collapse into it. The second was that the pathways on the estate were not surfaced to a council standard. A local resident said:

“My children are extremely eager to play on their garden toys but I am reluctant to let them do so because of the fear that the fence and land near to it will simply fall/slip down into the drain if they so much as go near it. Our garden (and I’m sure several of our neighbours’ gardens) are extremely fragile due to erosion caused by the ‘drain’ and the tractors who ‘dredge’ the sides by simply pulling the ground away. I feel like myself and my children are living like prisoners. I appreciate that this sounds extremely dramatic, but this is how this issue is making us feel. It’s especially hard during the school holidays when both of my children are off.”

The key issue in that case is that there was no way for the council to take any enforcement action against Persimmon to compel it to sort out the problem that had developed on the land very close to the drain that it had built houses on.

If residents had someone—an ombudsman, for example—to turn to, backed by real powers to compel developers to put right problems, such matters could be sorted out, without adding to the years of stress and misery, which my constituents are still going through. Although finally, after five years, we got Persimmon to a meeting where we agreed that it would carry out a report into what was happening, proper resolution of the problem at the back of those houses is still lacking.

Danielle Rowley: My constituency of Midlothian is the fastest growing in all Scotland, and every town and village has a huge new development. That is the same for a lot of areas throughout the UK, which is why it is such a big issue. With huge new developments, although there are also good developers, a lot of problems come to the fore. Such issues need to be tackled now as we are building on a scale we have not seen in a long time. I hope that the Minister will take note of all the fantastic contributions today, because this is an urgent issue that needs to be dealt with.

Diana Johnson: We also want to see more house building, so we need to get this sorted out and to get it right.

My constituents have asked me to say that they feel that the way in which a company such as Persimmon has behaved—with disregard for their problem for so many years—is an utter disgrace. Persimmon should be facing massive fines for its behaviour, not giving out the massive bonuses to which many hon. Members have referred.

As I started by saying, in Hull we have one of the most successful Help to Buy schemes. Persimmon has benefited, as did the former chief executive Jeff Fairburn with much of that £75 million in pay, shares and bonus that he pocketed. He has gone, obviously, but his successor at Persimmon, David Jenkinson, is getting about £40 million from the bonus scheme. That is not acceptable, and I hope that the Minister will comment.

In conclusion, my constituents’ issue has gone on for far too many years. It needs to be resolved. I hope that we see progress on an ombudsman with some real powers on the side of residents who have done their best—they are aspirational and want to buy their own homes—but find themselves in a nightmare scenario in which companies can simply ignore them and their problems.

2.52 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing this important debate. It is not before time that the House has had the opportunity to turn to the issues faced by homebuyers, in particular the buyers of new-build homes. At a time when we all recognise the need for substantial home building, we perhaps give too little thought to what happens after the homes are built, bought and sold, and to what happens to the buyers.

My hon. Friend has already spoken about the problems faced when defects are found after purchase and the difficulty of getting a response, let alone a solution, from the house builders. I can certainly echo her concern from experience in my constituency, but I want to look at a couple of other issues that also affect my constituents. The first is that of the completion and adoption of new housing estates. It has very much been a preoccupation for me, not just as an MP but as a local councillor in the years before that.

A new Barratt/David Wilson Homes and Persimmon Homes development was started more than 10 years ago. I will not name it because the residents have mixed views on whether that would be a good thing. Some householders were already living on the site when development stalled in about 2011, because many would-be buyers were unable to find mortgages after the banking crisis. It picked up again, however, and the last house was sold nearly two years ago—most of them long before that.

Families moved in with the promise of play areas for their children, but it took years for them to appear and, as many of those who bought early said, their children were now grown up and not interested in play areas—although, thankfully, the many younger children on the estate are. Buses that were promised to take people from the estate to the local bus interchange, avoiding the need to use a level crossing, did not materialise. The council proposed a price to adopt play areas and public open spaces, but the developers thought the price too high and opted to go with a private management company. Even now, however—one of the companies, Barratt’s
David Wilson Homes, has been updating me—they are still arguing about the cost and arrangements of that contract, meaning that residents are concerned about maintenance and safety into the future, and of course about the appearance of their estate.

A spine road runs through the estate, in a loop from one entrance to the other, but it was not until this year that work started on completing the surfacing of the road and installing kerbs for drainage. Checking that latest update I received, I find that the date for completion of the work has been pushed back to January ’19. Residents are very concerned about that, with lots of young children on the estate and cars flying about on a very uneven surface. They are worried about damage to the cars but they are much more worried about damage to the children, who until recently had nowhere else to play. Furthermore, no fees have yet been paid to the council for the adoption of the roads, despite its best efforts, and street lighting is not finally sorted out. I could go on—but we get the picture.

We—residents, local councillors and me—have not sat back and let that happen. We have met with the developers, looked at enforcement action and complained like hell. We even had a liaison committee with the two developers, to work through all the issues, but, sadly, despite hours of talk, everything seems to come down to money and the developers not wanting to spend the money on the estate to complete it.

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend is making some valuable points that have not been mentioned so far. The issue of unadopted roads came up on a new-build development in my constituency, especially with regard to an area where shops, the takeaway, restaurants, pubs and things have been built. The roads are unadopted, so people can just park wherever they like, creating huge issues with knock-on effects, such as on safety, which she has mentioned. I raised this in an Adjournment debate on the Floor of the main Chamber, and it would be great if something came out of this debate regarding unadopted roads on new-build estates.

Liz Twist: My hon. Friend reminds me of something else that I should have mentioned: at the time of buying the properties, my homebuyers were told that there would be a shop, a pub and a bus, but none of those things has come to pass. Even while we were telling residents that that was not going to happen, new buyers towards the end were still being told that there was going to be a pub on site—all the residents already knew that that was not going to happen. That is an important point, and she made another one about safety. As we all know, parking on new developments is a huge issue, with residents feeling it is insufficient and with the dangers that that can present.

Mrs Hodgson: On that very point, I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) have talked quite a bit about leasehold issues so I will not go over them all again, but I want to raise two points: service charges and the use of developers’ solicitors, either through encouragement or referral fees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston referred to the inquiry of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. As a member of that Committee, I heard from some leaseholders and other witnesses. Service charges are particularly important to leaseholders because of shared areas, but they affect new homebuyers, too, under the new arrangements where management companies may be involved in maintaining estates. It is important that people are clear about what their rights are and that they have redress when things go wrong. The problem of developers encouraging people to use their nominated solicitors affects both freeholders and leaseholders.

The residents on the anonymous estate that I mentioned the leaseholders who gave evidence to the Select Committee said that they were not informed of important issues about their properties or their estate, whether they were planning issues, were about the leasehold or were about increasing ground rents. For leaseholders, that can have particularly long-reaching effects. Not being told about ground rents and service charges or the way they increase means that some buyers of first homes are trapped in what was their dream first home, because they have a growing family and need to move. The Select Committee heard evidence that a number of people are trapped by increasing ground rent and the wariness of mortgage lenders to lend on those properties. Those people are especially affected, having been told they can buy the freehold in future, when they find out it has been sold on to developers at extortionate costs. That cannot be right.
It cannot be right that referrals fees, arm twisting or inducements such as new carpets or garden landscaping can be used by the seller to encourage the purchaser into using their preferred solicitor. There are codes of practice that solicitors are bound by, which should protect buyers, but the number of people who told us that they were not aware of conditions shows that something is going wrong. The system has to be seen to be fair and right. I hope the Minister will address that issue.

Homebuyers deserve protection and better ways of effectively addressing their concerns, whether they are freeholders or leaseholders. The proposed changes that my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston told us about would be helpful. However, as she said, voluntary codes are useful, but much more rigorous action needs to be taken to protect homebuyers. I hope the Minister will assure us that homebuyers will get the protection that they so need.

3.5 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I will not speak for all that long. I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for introducing the debate and those who have already spoken on leasehold and other issues.

In West Durrington, where 700 homes are being built, Chamonix Estates, working for Taylor Woodrow and for Persimmon, have some questions to answer from the residents. Although it is probably better not to use today to put those on the record in detail, if it does not solve the problems, I will.

What we are talking about has happened in the social sector, too. When I first became a Member of Parliament, I represented part of the Ferrier estate in Kidbrooke, where the Greater London Council had managed to build 5,000 homes, but where there was no pub, post office, church or chapel, and the sewerage system worked the wrong way rather than the right way. It was demolished within 20 or 30 years. Things were almost unbelievable until we heard the cases of some residents represented by Members of Parliament here in the debate.

I have a question for the Minister; I am sorry to put it to her without notice, so perhaps an answer by letter to Members would work. If she or her officials listened to “Money Box” on BBC Radio 4, they would have heard that if landlords charge leaseholders directly, there is no VAT, but if they charge them through a managing agent, there is VAT. Even taking the inputs into account, there is still a charge of between 15% and 13% extra. That needs to be sorted out before or after we leave the European Union. Apparently, it is a European Union requirement—I do not know whether that is true. It seems vital that we should take the opportunity, rather than having artificial arrangements, to make it plain that if the leaseholder pays the service charge there is no VAT, whether they pay it through a managing agent or directly to the landlord.

We understand that officials in the Department have to work on leasehold issues with greater width and depth than they did 10 years ago because, then, they did not know how many residential leasehold properties there were and it was not anticipated that so many more would be built. If the majority of homes are leasehold, we have to put the majority of our effort into ensuring that new leaseholders of flats, old leaseholders of houses and flats, and everyone else, get a fair deal. The Prime Minister talks about justice for all—justice for those leaseholders should be a big part of that.

3.7 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Sharma. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) on bringing not only a very important but a highly interesting debate to listen to, which has included various Members around the Chamber. It is very challenging to sum up the debate because there have been so many powerful points made by so many hon. Members, but I will do my best to pick out some of the key points as I saw them.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston talked about the unhappy homebuyer experience and the impact that has on people when they have made a huge investment in their future. She also mentioned the number of problems that occur, particularly with new homes. Giving due praise to good home builders is important, because there are many. I am very fortunate: in the highlands, due to the scale—it is probably not the same scale as in other urban areas—the home builders are very good in general. They are not without problems—there are still issues, which I will talk about later. The hon. Lady was right to pick out those large developers who are getting away with some of the things she described.

The hon. Lady said that buying a home was one of the big, significant life changes, but that buyers were having to buy their houses more or less without having seen the final build. She also talked about the introduction of the new homes ombudsman. Like her, I would like to know more about what that will entail. It would be useful if the Minister covered some of those points, albeit she may want to do so briefly. The hon. Lady was right also to highlight the dangers of a voluntary approach when there is clearly such a widespread problem in house building.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) mentioned issues for leaseholders as opposed to freeholders, and went on to address issues with ground rents and service charge hikes. I will talk later about property factoring charges. Those are important issues for people. Importantly, he also mentioned fire safety and sprinkler legislation, and pointed out the moves to tackle those issues in both Wales and Scotland.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned shocking additional charges that homebuyers uncover after purchase. That is clearly wrong. No one should be put in a position where they buy blind and suddenly find additional costs coming out of the woodwork—literally, in this case.

It is important to highlight the serious issue of solicitors’ conflict of interest, which a number of Members raised. It makes no real sense for the system to exist in that way. Clearly, there has to be segregation so people have confidence in the legal process when they buy a new home. The hon. Gentleman talked about people being pressured to use a solicitor from a panel due to purchase time pressures. Consumers should not be put under pressure when making a purchase of such magnitude in their lives. He challenged the Minister on those issues.

He also raised the issue of paying maintenance charges twice, which I will come to, and suggested that the Minister might want to look at a retention scheme.
The hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) told us, shockingly, that she had waited five years for a meeting. That is disgraceful, and she rightly named and shamed Persimmon for doing that.

She mentioned the issue of sinking gardens, which sounds horrendous, and one householder’s fear that her fence and land would slip into the drain, which the council could not take enforcement action on. Since Persimmon was mentioned a number of times, it is important to touch on the obscene bonuses paid to its chief executives. Surely, such grandiose remuneration is unacceptable.

Other hon. Members talked about completion and adoption, promises that are made about facilities and the scary arguments that come later with developers about costs. It is common for problems to occur a couple of years after the purchase price is paid and people move in, and for the developer either to be nowhere to be found or to argue. That is simply not good enough.

We do not know what consumer protection measures will be proposed—as was highlighted, they have yet to be published—but they are unlikely directly to affect Scotland because of the devolved nature of housing. However, that does not mean they will have no effect, so I am keen to see what comes from them. For a number of years, homeowners have had issues with property factors. The UK Government recently consulted on the issue as part of its implementation of reforms to the leasehold system, which is very different.

The Scottish Government brought forward the Property Factors (Scotland) Act 2011, which means that since 2012, registration has been compulsory for property factors operating in Scotland and they have had to follow a code of conduct outlining minimum standards. There is also a new dispute resolution system. The homeowner housing panel, and now the housing and property chamber of the first-tier tribunal for Scotland, have allowed homeowners to challenge property factors in Scotland.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Property factors being property management agents in Scottish speak, yes?

Drew Hendry: I am very grateful for that intervention. That is an important point. Lots of people are in a vulnerable situation. They tend to be elderly people and people with disabilities, but it is important to recognise that there are other vulnerable groups, such as the young and inexperienced, who may not be able to think about entering into a contract in the same way as other people. Some people have found it difficult to get recourse when work is not done to the standard they expect, and others have found that maintenance of communal landscaped areas is ignored completely.

As well as introducing measures to protect homeowners, the Scottish Government are working to ensure that those who aspire to home ownership are able to achieve it. I will mention a specific programme that the Minister may find it useful to hear about. Ensuring that everyone has a safe, warm and affordable home is central to the Scottish Government’s drive for a fairer and more prosperous Scotland. Since 2007, they have delivered more than 80,000 new homes—as a proportion of the population, that is a third more than in England and three quarters more than in Wales. More than 28,000 households have been supported through the Scottish Government’s low-cost initiative for first time buyers scheme and the Help to Buy programme. Nearly 20,000 houses have been built for affordable home ownership.

The Scottish Government have also introduced a new land and buildings transaction tax relief for first-time buyers, which will raise the zero-rate threshold for that group to £175,000, benefiting all first-time buyers in Scotland by up to £600. That reform means that more than 85% of those who have bought a property worth £40,000 or more since April 2015 have either paid less tax compared with stamp duty land tax, or no tax at all.

Affordable housing to buy is very important for my constituents and across Scotland. A recent survey found that increasing numbers of young people want to live and work in the highlands and islands. In 2015, when the survey was previously carried out, many young people cited poor connectivity and a lack of housing as barriers to wanting to stay.

Working together is delivering results. Mid-market rent projects are delivered through the city deal investment in a partnership between the Highland Council, the Scottish Government and house builders. Through partnerships with Highland Housing Alliance and others, young people who cannot yet afford a mortgage are given the opportunity to rent a home at a mid-market rate to allow them to save for a deposit and buy the property after a number of years.

I want to quote my constituents, Sally and Ruairidh, who have just moved into their new home this week through the Highland Housing Alliance mid-market rent initiative. They will be able to buy the property in five years, after paying a mid-market rent that allows them to save. Sally said:

“This move has been transformational for me and my partner. We are now in a secure home where we hope to start a family one day, and we’re able to save hundreds more each month to help us towards a deposit for a mortgage.”

The Raining’s Stairs development in my constituency in Inverness, which includes mid-market rent properties, won the award for the best residential development of
under 70 homes at the Inside Housing development awards in London last month, so it is appropriate to mention it in this debate. Some 55% of Help To Buy recipients were aged 30 years or under. The Scottish Government recently announced a further £100 million to extend the scheme by two years to March 2021, to help even more people into home ownership.

The debate has been interesting. I wanted to touch on points specific to Scotland, but I will underline that some of the voices we have heard talking this afternoon about the costs incurred by constituents and homebuyers and about the activities of house builders have been eye-opening. I hope that the Minister has had her ears open and is willing to proactively address the many deep concerns that people have. I look forward to hearing her response.

3.31 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing this important debate. I commend the exceptional and knowledgeable contribution that she made in opening the debate, which has taken us far beyond the debate’s title. The contributions have been wide and varied, but they all fall within the subject of justice and fairness for people buying their own homes.

If we are to end the housing crisis, we need to build hundreds of thousands of new homes every year, but what is sometimes lost in a number-focused, target-based approach to house building is the issue of quality. The desire or requirement to complete at speed overshadows the checks and details that people buying brand-new homes expect to have within the system of sign-off before properties are exchanged. Unfortunately, far too many new homes fail to live up to the standards that homebuyers should be able to take for granted.

A YouGov survey commissioned by Shelter found that almost all homeowners of recent new builds experienced some problems when moving in, with more than half of new homes having major faults. As a consequence, there is a crisis of confidence in the quality of new homes, with only two in 10 people thinking that new homes were built to a higher standard than old ones, and only three in 10 preferring to live in a new home rather than an old one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston made some alarming statements in her contribution. There was a higher level of danger in some new homes, with only two in 10 people thinking that new homes were built to a higher standard than old ones, and only three in 10 preferring to live in a new home rather than an old one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West talked about the lack of information about leaseholds. There is a real lack of knowledge and understanding, so perhaps the Minister will set out what she is doing to make sure that people are aware of their situation when they buy a home. Clear, concise information is needed. When people buy a new home, the amount of information they are sent is enormous, so how can we make sure that leasehold information is at the top of their list of concerns and is addressed and explained properly? My hon. Friend also highlighted the purchase of freeholds. The price is often set far out of the reach of individuals, or the freehold is sold to third parties.

There is also the issue of rip-off fees charged by freeholders. The Minister has overseen changes to rip-off fees in the rental sector to some extent. She took on board many of my comments in the Tenant Fees Bill Committee, and I thank her for that, but when will she take further action? If rip-off fees are not acceptable in the rental sector, we cannot say that they are acceptable in the home ownership sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston talked about the rip-offs around ground rents rising to extortionate levels, making homes unmortgageable and unsellable. He described the valiant efforts of his constituent, Katie, who led a campaign on behalf of leaseholders around the country to highlight that scandal in all our minds. There is an opportunity to take retrospective action, but the Government have been reluctant to talk about it. I have no doubt there are complications, but, as my hon. Friend said, this matter is the PPI of the homebuying and leasehold sector. If we can take action on PPI contracts, why can we not take action on those leasehold contracts?

The creation of a new homes ombudsman is welcome news for consumers, but when can we expect to see that ombudsman in action? Precisely what powers will they have? The Government must press ahead with greater enthusiasm to give homebuyers the sense of security that buying a new home does not come with a Pandora’s box of problems and headaches for owners. That includes the issue of leasehold, which my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) dealt with in great detail. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse said that the Government recognise that there are gaps and failings in legislation relating to leaseholders, but no concrete action has yet been taken. I am sure he feels the Government owe it to his constituents to get it sorted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West talked about the lack of information about leaseholds. There is a real lack of knowledge and understanding, so perhaps the Minister will set out what she is doing to make sure that people are aware of their situation when they buy a home. Clear, concise information is needed. When people buy a new home, the amount of information they are sent is enormous, so how can we make sure that leasehold information is at the top of their list of concerns and is addressed and explained properly? My hon. Friend also highlighted the purchase of freeholds. The price is often set far out of the reach of individuals, or the freehold is sold to third parties.

There is also the issue of rip-off fees charged by freeholders. The Minister has overseen changes to rip-off fees in the rental sector to some extent. She took on board many of my comments in the Tenant Fees Bill Committee, and I thank her for that, but when will she take further action? If rip-off fees are not acceptable in the rental sector, we cannot say that they are acceptable in the home ownership sector.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston talked about the rip-offs around ground rents rising to extortionate levels, making homes unmortgageable and unsellable. He described the valiant efforts of his constituent, Katie, who led a campaign on behalf of leaseholders around the country to highlight that scandal in all our minds. There is an opportunity to take retrospective action, but the Government have been reluctant to talk about it. I have no doubt there are complications, but, as my hon. Friend said, this matter is the PPI of the homebuying and leasehold sector. If we can take action on PPI contracts, why can we not take action on those leasehold contracts?

The creation of a new homes ombudsman is welcome news for consumers, but when can we expect to see that ombudsman in action? Precisely what powers will they have? The Government must press ahead with greater enthusiasm to give homebuyers the sense of security they need when buying a new-build home. Despite a home being the most expensive and important purchase that most of us will ever make, homebuyers too often do not enjoy the same protections that we enjoy when we buy even the most basic everyday goods and services. If somebody bought a book with missing pages, a box of chocolates with their fillings missing or a TV that did not produce a picture, they would be able simply to return the product for a refund or a replacement. But when it comes to a new house, consumers are left to navigate a complex and inadequate warranty system, the whims of developers and the small print of warranty providers. When problems arise, new homebuyers have
to go through toil and stress simply to get what they paid for and what they should rightfully be entitled to as consumers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson)—a democratically elected Member of this House who is of some civic standing—said it took her five years to get a meeting with a developer. Developers must understand the potential for embarrassment when being held to account publicly in this place. It should not take a Member of Parliament to have to address this matter. It should be simple and straightforward for an individual to get action from developers, and it certainly should not take my hon. Friend five years to get an audience with these incredibly important people in the developer sector.

Helen Goodman: My hon. Friend on the Front Bench is making a strong speech. Does she not agree that the large number of cases presented today and previously shows that the situation is not accidental? We are talking not about one or two mistakes, but about a deliberate strategy by the developers to set things up so that they have all the cards and the homeowner has no rights.

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend is right. Some of the dismissive responses from some developers have been mentioned in the debate: “Have you been doing this?” “Well, yes.” “Has it previously been to the disadvantage of leaseholders?” “Well, yes.” “Have you been able to do anything about it?” “Perhaps, but it is only now that we are prepared to do it.” It just goes to show that highlighting such things and putting pressure on the companies can have a swift effect, not least if they want to save their reputational skins.

It is not acceptable that people have to put up with major problems with their home or delay moving in, or even that they have to move out during belated repairs to bring the house up to scratch. The Government should bring forward a full suite of consumer rights for homebuyers when they introduce the measure on the new homes ombudsman. However, when more than half of new homes are built with major problems, it is clear that problems in providing protection and standards to homebuyers run deeper than consumer rights. There are clear failings across the house building sector, allowing homes to be built systematically in a way that quite clearly falls below the standard that anyone should expect.

That was highlighted well by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), when she talked about unfinished estates and issues of completion, adoption and delays. She mentioned people living for too long on unfinished estates and issues of completion, adoption and delays. She also highlighted the information pack post-sale. She also highlighted the issue of training for subcontracted staff, and looked forward to high-quality apprenticeships in the building sector. Those are issues that it is well worth considering.

We have a planning permission bidding system with too much flexibility on both affordable housing and standards of building, and bidders can see the building of a home to a high standard as a costly extra. Too often, they fail to recognise that they are not simply building houses; they are building communities, which confers on them a corporate ethical responsibility. They should take pride in the work they do, the homes they provide, and the communities they are building around the country. It sticks in the craw when large companies exploit the system and fail to live up to their moral duty to deliver affordable housing of an acceptable standard, but still pay uncomfortably high bonuses—despite benefiting from the Government Help to Buy system.

We have already heard about Persimmon’s horrendous customer service. My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North may be surprised to learn that it gets three out of five stars for customer satisfaction. Perhaps she would think that that rates it rather too highly. It will no doubt be disappointed that it is not getting five stars in the HBF customer satisfaction ratings, but rather than concentrating on improving building standards or communication with customers, it insists on paying out £75 million in bonuses to its executives. That is alarming.

Last year, I met the new bosses of Bovis Homes, another company that was struggling to meet acceptable standards, because of a combination of over-expansion, too much subcontracting and being too distant from customers. For a long time it had a five-star building rating, of which it was incredibly proud, but it lost it. It was heartening for me—and it did not take me five years to get a meeting—to hear that Bovis bosses were determined to turn things around. They were quite crestfallen that the company’s reputation had been hit so hard. They had been known as a high-quality, trusted home building brand. Customers were pleased at the change of heart, but there were those who had hoped to move into their dream-forever home for whom the game change was too little, too late.

The need to build hundreds of thousands of homes a year should not lead to reduced standards in house building or allow companies to exploit the housing crisis by making a fortune from an under-regulated housing system. The Government should consider the call from the Federation of Master Builders for a licence to practise, to root out cowboy builders who forgo the rules during construction.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston talked about a single homebuyers code, developers not being able to insist on particular solicitors to be used by homebuyers—who would have a free choice—and an information pack post-sale. She also highlighted the issue of training for subcontracted staff, and looked forward to high-quality apprenticeships in the building sector. Those are issues that it is well worth considering.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse talked about safety and retrofitting sprinklers, and that should not be forgotten. The issue is not just about houses; it is also about flats, of course. When we think about high-rises, the Grenfell tragedy and its effects should not soon be forgotten if we want citizens to be safe.

I hope that the Government will take seriously what has been said in the debate, which was a good and helpful one. I hope they will seek to tighten regulation of planning standards and materials quality, and ensure that the homes we build are safe and up to scratch. Like the HomeOwners Alliance, the Government should want better new build, and should take much stronger action, including retrospective action for leaseholders.

3.36 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Mrs Heather Wheeler): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Sharma, as it was to serve under Ms Ryan’s.
I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for securing the debate and providing an opportunity to debate all the issues. I understand that she and many of us present today want better protection for purchasers of new-build homes. The Government are committed to making the housing market work. We aim to increase house building to an average of 300,000 net new homes a year by the mid-2020s. As we move towards achieving that target, we will not sacrifice higher quality and standards. They must go hand in hand. It is vital that as housing supply increases the quality of new-build homes continues to improve. In our housing White Paper we set out our ambition for a housing market that works for everyone. We expect all housing developers to deliver good quality housing, to do it on time, and to treat house buyers fairly.

I, like other hon. Members, was shocked to hear about the terrible experiences of the poor families featured on “5 live Investigates”, including the home with 354 faults. For families who worked hard to save and buy their new home it should have been an exciting time, as so many hon. Members have said. The programme highlighted the plight of Mr. Wakeman and his partner Tracey Bickford. It was heartbreaking to hear Mr. Wakeman read the list of issues with their home, and describe the disgraceful disruption to their lives, including having to move out of their home. Although theirs is an extreme example, such cases happen far too often. We all hear of them happening. I have heard it from many constituents who write to me through their Members of Parliament, and also in my own constituency correspondence.

Equally familiar are stories of houses not completed on time and purchasers who are not kept informed, which the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) discussed. Families and households save for years to afford a new home. Those of us who are fortunate enough to have bought a home can remember the feeling of excitement and joy at getting the keys. Everyone deserves to be able to enjoy their home and start a new happy chapter in their lives.

We know that mistakes will happen. Building new homes is a complex undertaking, involving many different skills and trades, which necessarily means that there is a higher risk of something going wrong. The critical thing, however, is that when things do go wrong, house builders and warranty providers fulfil their obligations to put things right. The Government have been absolutely clear on that point. In too many cases problems with build and finish quality are not resolved quickly enough. The after-sale service that developers provide must improve. We shall therefore be keeping the pressure up on industry, not only to put things right but to prevent them from going wrong in the first place.

The Government are committed to reforming the process for purchasers of new-build homes to obtain redress. I acknowledge that the current process is complicated, and that the proliferation of schemes and warranties has resulted in varying levels of service and protection. That is why we are taking action.

In October—only two months ago—we announced our intention to bring forward legislation to require all developers to belong to a new homes ombudsman, because it is absolutely right that consumers should have fair, quick and easy ways to get things put right when they have a problem. Earlier this year we consulted on how we could improve redress, not just in relation to new-build homes, but for residents across all housing sectors. I will return to this later, but let me say now that we will be publishing our response to that consultation soon. At the same time as exploring more substantive reforms, we are challenging industry to simplify redress now and to provide proper support for consumers in the early years of a house purchase, when most problems occur, until we have the ombudsman in place.

In November—one month ago—I met the executive chairman of the Home Builders Federation, which is taking forward proposals to implement a better redress system, based on the recommendations in the reports by the all-party parliamentary group for excellence in the built environment published in 2016 and this year. I believe this work is a positive step in the right direction.

The hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston was very agitated, as were many other hon. Members, about the potential conflict of interest with solicitors. It is not acceptable that there is a conflict of interest. The Secretary of State has written to the Law Society on the issue and has also written to the Solicitors Regulation Authority, in the context of leasehold reform and conflicts of interest between developers and conveyancers. I expect those two authorities to take note and come back to us on the matter.

A number of hon. Members mentioned that we often hear that new-build homes are not completed to the standards required under building regulations. These regulations set the standards for the design and construction of new homes. The primary responsibility for compliance rests with the people carrying out the work. Work on new homes is subject to building control either by the local authority or a private approved inspector. However, it is the responsibility of the building control body to take all reasonable steps to assess compliance. It is a spot check process carried out at certain points during the building work. A building regulations compliance certificate issued by a building control body is not a guarantee of the highest standards and the responsibility is not removed from the builder or developer. If a consumer feels that the building control body did not carry out its functions properly, they may complain to the local government and social care ombudsman in respect of a local authority. A complaint about an approved inspector can be made to CICAIR, the Construction Industry Council Approved Inspectors Register, which is the body that approves inspectors.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) asked about sections in the Housing Act 2004 and about local authority powers to make developers undertake remediation for unsafe cladding. I will write to him about that and also about retrospective fire sprinklers.

Melanie Onn: I recently visited London Fire Brigade to talk about building regulations and the checks that are undertaken. The issue with spot checks is a real concern for safety. The failure to put an insulation sock underneath a window caused a new-build block of flats to be engulfed by fire just weeks after people had moved in. Can the Minister think of anything more that can be done to strengthen the system, to make sure it goes further than spot checks, so that key factors that support people’s safety in their homes are not missed?
Mrs Wheeler: I thank the hon. Lady for that very useful intervention. My team will take that back and we will write to her with an answer.

We know more needs to be done and expect more to be done. That is why the Government announced measures to champion the rights of buyers of new-build homes, including a new homes ombudsman. That will provide one obvious place for consumers to go, and will have the powers such a body needs and the interests of consumers at its heart. It will ensure that when people buy a new-build home and do not find the standard of build they expect, they are treated fairly and their concerns are dealt with quickly. We will work with consumers and the industry to develop our proposals, which will be published in more detail soon and will set out the scope and powers of the ombudsman.

In the meantime, we have been challenging industry to improve redress in the shorter term. The work being done by the Home Builders Federation could lead to a voluntary new homes ombudsman and better redress for consumers in the short term, while Government works towards legislation. In our response to our redress consultation we will set out the standard we expect these voluntary arrangements to meet. We also expect that any new redress scheme for buyers of new-build homes should be free to the consumer, as in other sectors.

We believe there should be a clear and quick escalation route for issues of building safety and are exploring a number of options. Again, we call on the industry to implement actions and processes so that the examples which will be published in more detail soon and will set out the scope and powers of the ombudsman.

Further to building regulations and standards of new-build finish, the leasehold system needs to be fair and transparent to the consumer, so that their home truly feels like their own. Unfair practices in the leasehold market have no place in the modern housing market, nor do excessive ground rents, which exploit consumers who get nothing in return. In July, the Government announced that no Government-funded scheme would be used to support the unjustified use of leasehold for new houses.

Sir Peter Bottomley: We are all grateful for what the Government have said in the past and what the Minister is saying now. One of the problems with ground rent is the question of what it is there for at all. The commonhold gets rid of ground rents. We do not know whether the help to buy scheme is used to commonhold. Can the Minister make an announcement about how that problem will be solved, so that commonhold homes can be accepted for help to buy?

Mrs Wheeler: There are discussions going on about commonhold. I will be happy to talk to my hon. Friend about this offline.

Our technical consultation on how to improve the leasehold market and make it fairer for consumers has now closed, and we are analysing the responses. We want to see developers support everyone who has onerous ground rents, including second-hand buyers, and for customers to be proactively contacted. We are helping existing leaseholders by making it easier and quicker for leaseholders to form residents’ and tenants’ associations. We are proposing a single, mandatory and legally enforceable code of practice covering letting and managing agents, giving people a clearer and simpler route to redress. We are publishing a how-to-lease guide for consumers and looking carefully at how we currently give support and advice to leaseholders.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) was very interested in educating leaseholders. We are publishing the how-to-lease guide, which will educate leaseholders. We have also held workshops with the industry to develop the how-to-buy and how-to-sell guides, which will be published in 2019.

The hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse asked about leasehold reforms. LEASE, the group that we use to help give information, is unambiguously on the side of leaseholders. LEASE no longer pursues any commercial interests and it does not advise leasehold professionals. [HON. MEMBERS: “Good.”] Yay—I just had a good. Get that in Hansard—sorry, I shouldn’t say that.

The hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West asked about permission fees. Lord Best has a working group that is considering permission fees and whether they are reasonable or they should be banned in total.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned the £10 ground rent. For a peppercorn to exist there must be a consideration of exchange of money. We are concerned that peppercorn could be open to abuse and therefore we have considered that an amount should be specified in statute. We have chosen £10 because that is the annual amount used for right to buys.

Justin Madders: It is helpful to have that explanation, because I have been mystified about what led to that situation. Obviously, peppercorns have been around for centuries; I do not know whether there is some legal advice that the Minister may be able to share, even confidentially, about why we still have to have a financial figure rather than a peppercorn.

Mrs Wheeler: Given the previous week’s history of sharing legal advice, I might skip over that one, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind. Perhaps he and I could have a cup of tea. The £10 peppercorn ground rent was part of our recent leasehold consultation and we will be considering our approach in light of the responses to the consultation.

Sir Peter Bottomley: How about 1lb weight of peppercorns?

Mrs Wheeler: Black pepper or white pepper?

Melanie Onn: Or pink?

Mrs Wheeler: Or pink—yes, please—or green, we could have green pepper as well. This poor Hansard writer, dearie me.

I recognise that many freeholders have to pay charges toward the maintenance and upkeep of communal areas on an estate. That is especially prevalent on new estates, exactly as the hon. Member for Blaydon mentioned. Freeholders who are unhappy about the transparency of those charges are becoming an increasingly frequent part of my ministerial postbag, and I understand why they are unhappy. Leaseholders have a whole suite of

---

protections and rights that enable them to hold management companies to account, but freeholders have no such equivalent, even though they may be paying for the same or similar services.

The Government agree that the current situation is unfair to freeholders, and we are committed to legislating to plug that gap. We have set out our proposed approach to implementing those measures in part 4 of the recent leasehold reform consultation, which closed on 26 November. We intend to create a new statutory regime for freeholders, based on the rights enjoyed by leaseholders, which will ensure that maintenance charges must be reasonably incurred and services provided of an acceptable standard, and include a right to challenge the reasonableness of charges at the property tribunal.

Helen Goodman: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I do not know whether she noticed my ten-minute rule Bill on that precise point, but when she brings forward the legislation or proposals on freeholders, would she consider capping the charges and making it possible for the freeholders to buy and self-manage the common areas, which, as she knows, are being sold on and on and on to a series of exploitative management agents?

Mrs Wheeler: The hon. Lady poses a number of questions, all of which are very interesting. I will reread Hansard after the debate and take on board what I can.

The Government agree that the situation is unfair, so we intend to introduce a new statutory regime and are considering whether freeholders should have a right to change the provider of maintenance services by applying to the tribunal for appointment of a new manager, which may be useful if a freeholder is dissatisfied with the service they are receiving. As it happens, my officials are now analysing the responses and the Government intend to bring forward legislation to implement changes as soon as parliamentary time allows.

We move on to another area in this vast debate, home buying and selling. Around 1 million homes are bought and sold in England each year, but another 25% to 33% of planned sales fall through, costing consumers around £270 million and creating stress for far too many people. The Government published our response to the home buying and selling call for evidence in April 2018, setting out an ambitious programme of action to make the buying and selling process in England cheaper, faster and less stressful, in line with our manifesto commitment. There is no silver bullet that can change everything at a stroke and fix the process. Instead, we will need to make a number of practical changes, some big, some small, which taken together will make the experience much better. To put hon. Members’ minds at rest, we as a Government are here to tackle those issues.

We have already started work. We have created a new working group focusing on the regulation of property agents, chaired by Lord Best. We have begun working with industry and the National Trading Standards estate agency team to develop guidance on making referral fees more transparent and to look at the case for banning them. We have also doubled the funding available to that team. We have written to all local authorities reminding them of the Government’s ambition to have a property search request completed within 10 working days. We have consulted in implementing reforms to the leasehold system, seeking views on fixed timeframes and maximum fees for freeholders and managing agents to provide leasehold information.

We have held workshops with industry to develop detailed and thorough how-to-buy and how-to-sell guides to inform consumers, to be published in 2019. We have started work with industry and consumers to make conveyancing data more transparent so that buyers and sellers can make a more informed choice and we have worked with industry to develop a standardised reservation agreement. We will commission behavioural insight analysis to support its implementation; it will increase commitment between buyers and sellers much earlier in the process. Together, our reforms will create a much better process, which guides buyers and sellers and gives them the information they need at the time they need it, allowing them to make the biggest purchase of their lives with confidence.

I confirm to the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse that I will write to him regarding cladding and sprinklers. My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West kindly brought up the question of VAT on service charges. As he will know, that is a matter for Her Majesty’s Treasury, but it is something that has only recently raised its head, so I will write to him about that.

On bonuses for those larger businesses, we announced in August that we are helping to improve shareholder scrutiny of executive pay, strengthen the employee voice in boardrooms and build confidence in how large companies are run. Under those reforms, all quoted companies will be required to disclose and explain annually the rationale for the chief executive’s pay and the ratio to the average pay of their UK employees. The new reforms will provide greater transparency on the impact of share growth and executive pay.

The Government have been clear that this should be a country that works for everyone. That means building more of the right homes in the right places and ensuring the housing market works for all parts of our community. We must ensure that ordinary people purchasing a new home have the protection they deserve and are treated fairly.

Mrs Hodgson: I was listening carefully to the Minister, but I may have missed this—if I did, I am very sorry. I wonder if she could say something about a point that both my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman) and I mentioned, about referring some of these dodgy lawyers, conveyancers or solicitors to the Law Society when they are not acting in the best interests of their client, who should be the buyer.

Mrs Wheeler: Absolutely. I am sorry that the hon. Lady did not hear me say it, but the Secretary of State has written to the Solicitors Regulation Authority, the SRA.

Mrs Hodgson: Thank you.

Mrs Wheeler: My absolute pleasure. We must ensure that everybody has the protection they deserve and is treated fairly, and that all efforts are made to ensure that builders build to the standards and finishes that we expect. Once again, I thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston for securing this valuable debate, and I look forward to her summing-up speech, right now.

3.58 pm

Kate Green: I thank all hon. Members, the Front-Bench spokespersons and the Minister for their contributions to this wide-ranging and, if I may say so, very well-informed
debate. I again thank all the individuals who shared their stories with me and with other colleagues who are here—in particular those who joined in the discussion by participating in the House of Commons digital debate.

I very much welcome the Minister’s commitment this afternoon to improving protections and redress for homebuyers, and I look forward to—I hope it will be soon—the Government’s publication of their response to the consultation responses that they have received. There is considerable enthusiasm in the House for receiving further details of the homebuyer’s ombudsman scheme and further information on the strengthening of protections for leaseholders. The House will have noted the Minister’s promise of legislation when time allows, and I hope that that time will come shortly. We also will have noted that she sees industry-led reforms, although welcome, as only an interim step in underpinning the protection that buyers need.

I echo the comment made at the start of the debate by the hon. Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley): that many builders do a good job and many buyers are delighted with their new homes. However, we are all very pleased to have had the opportunity this afternoon to give voice to the very legitimate concerns of those who have been treated shoddily. As the Minister undertakes to hold the industry to account, we in the House undertake to those individuals to hold the Minister to account. We will not allow the encouraging commitments that she has made this afternoon to our constituents simply to slip away.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered protection for homebuyers.

4.1 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall
Tuesday 18 December 2018

[TM PHILIP HOLLOBONE in the Chair]

Traidcraft and Fair Trade

9.30 am

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Traidcraft and the future of fair trade.

It is a pleasure to open this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince), who chairs the all-party parliamentary group for Fairtrade, for their support in making the application to the Backbench Business Committee.

In one of those strange coincidences, when I was thinking about my Christmas card competition for local primary schools last summer, an officer from Gateshead Council—my local authority—telephoned the office and suggested that this year the theme should be fair trade. That seemed an excellent idea to me. Gateshead prides itself on being a Fairtrade authority. In Traidcraft, a Fairtrade company and charity based on the Team Valley trading estate, we had a real local connection and a topic that would get pupils thinking about just what fair trade means for us here in the UK and for producers who grow, create and supply fair trade goods and products, especially in the lead up to Christmas, when we think of gifts and rich food.

I was shocked to hear in September that Traidcraft was in difficulty, facing potential closure and consulting its 60-plus staff based in its Team Valley warehouse and offices on potential redundancies. Traidcraft has a personal significance to me. Over many years I have been a Traidcraft customer, and its craft products are scattered around my home. Some may even have appeared as raffle prizes over the years. Indeed, I have been a trader, although sadly not a very successful one.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. I could share many happy memories of buying Traidcraft goods from the late 70s. My sister used to run a stall for Traidcraft in her church, St Robert’s in Morpeth. She ran an evening at the place where I worked in North Shields. It was in her church, St Robert’s in Morpeth. She ran an evening at the place where I worked in North Shields. It is not just about getting gifts and helping people to have nice things from abroad; what was crucial was the raising of awareness for people who otherwise would not be aware of the need for fair trade.

Liz Twist: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that Fairtrade traders, through Traidcraft, have worked to sell goods and, importantly, to raise the social and fair trade issues around those goods.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Last month, I attended an event hosted by Traidcraft in Newcastle entitled, “Who picked my tea?” It is a brilliant campaign that has resulted in Yorkshire Tea, Twinings, Tetley and Clipper all publishing who is picking their tea and their list of suppliers. That should help drive up the standards for those tea plantations in Assam. Does my hon. Friend share my view of the importance of Traidcraft’s work? Will she join me in calling on PG Tips and Typhoo to publish that information as well?

Liz Twist: I most certainly do agree with my hon. Friend. Traidcraft and the Fairtrade Foundation have played a huge part in ensuring that producers are accountable and that those principles are applied fairly.

My mother loved to look at the Traidcraft catalogue, find out what was going on from the Traidcraft bulletins and buy products—mostly chocolate, it should be said—from the back of her church. Churches have played a hugely important part in selling Traidcraft goods. She would get me to buy products either from the Traidcraft shop in Team Valley or on the internet.

Apart from my personal reasons for feeling sad at the news of possible closure and the loss of 60 jobs from our local economy in Gateshead, there are much more serious reasons why so many people were sad to hear of Traidcraft’s difficulties. As the company has said, it was “overwhelmed by the outpouring of public concern and offers of support which demonstrates that the mission of Traidcraft still matters to many, many people”.

That is absolutely right. Next year marks the 40th anniversary of Traidcraft plc. Established as a Fairtrade enterprise, it initially provided a market for handcrafted items from Bangladesh at a time of great political turmoil there. Handicrafts, because they required minimal capital outlay for women in affected communities and could be produced alongside farming activities, provide an additional income source while preserving food security. Those values of supporting women, developing resilience and environmental concern have been recurring themes for Traidcraft over the years.

From its creation in 1979, the company developed into a public limited company with 4,500 individual shareholders and shares traded on the ethical stock exchange. It buys groceries and craft items from more than 70 producer groups in around 30 countries. Goods are sold through community resellers, online and through specialist fair trade shops. Traidcraft has pioneered fair trade products such as wine, charcoal and rubber gloves, alongside more familiar products such as tea, coffee, chocolate and biscuits. It has reached into thousands of homes—including my mum’s—and communities through its community sales force. What is more, it has had a real impact on the lives of countless producers and their families, delivering real social change.

Traidcraft was at the forefront of the Fairtrade movement and was a founder member of the Fairtrade Foundation along with Oxfam, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, Christian Aid, the Women’s Institute and the World Development Movement. The Fairtrade movement developed the Fairtrade certification system, which enabled those same fair trade principles to be applied by mainstream businesses. That was a vital tool for those businesses wanting to establish fairer and more just trading relationships and provided an independent guarantee for consumers.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady and the others on securing this important debate. I declare an interest, having been a member of the board of Twin, a fair trade organisation. I have been
involved in fair trade for well over 20 years. The point that she makes about mainstream organisations is absolutely right. Does she agree that without the work of Traidcraft and others, such as CAFOD and Twin, fair trade would not have been taken up by the mainstream supermarkets, resulting in the enormous boost to fair trade that means that the UK has, I believe, the largest fair trade market in the world?

Liz Twist: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point. I sincerely believe that without the input of those organisations and Traidcraft, we would not be in the position where we now take it for granted that we can obtain fairly traded goods in mainstream supermarkets and other shops. I most certainly agree with him on that point.

The Fairtrade Foundation has recognised that Traidcraft plc’s approach has been an inspiration to many and that the approach it pioneered in 1979 is now also being taken forward, as the hon. Gentleman said, by other brands and businesses that choose to trade fairly. Traidcraft also established a separate development charity, Traidcraft Exchange—thankfully, it is not under threat—which is supported by individual donations and institutional donors including the Department for International Development, Comic Relief and the Big Lottery Fund. The charity works with farmers and artisans who are not part of fair trade supply chains and campaigns for justice in international trade.

So, what happened to Traidcraft? Just as for many other UK businesses, life has been difficult. The retail environment has been particularly challenging. The success of fair trade products in mainstream suppliers and their availability in supermarkets is welcome, but that challenges fair trade enterprises such as Traidcraft on price and scale.

Much as we might like to escape the B-word, it is simply not possible. Currency fluctuations immediately after the EU referendum and uncertainty about Brexit continue to affect Traidcraft. Traidcraft estimates that the drop in the value of the pound within a week of the referendum cost the company £350,000. With most of the company’s £2.4 million of purchases from suppliers in developing countries paid in dollars, that early 15% currency drop meant that Traidcraft had less to spend, and holding true to its long-held fair trade principles meant that it could not, as others might, exert downward price pressure on its suppliers.

Catherine McKinnell: I share my hon. Friend’s concern about the impact on Traidcraft, and its need to reduce operations, because I, too, am proud of the fact that it has such strong roots in the north-east, in our region. Does she share my concern that the implications are not short term? Does she agree that we need to ensure that not only Traidcraft but all businesses that want to trade ethically can do so, and that that is not affected in any way by our departure from the EU?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. From our experience in the north-east, we know that a great many companies—not just Traidcraft, which we are discussing today—continue to feel the impact of the current uncertainty and fluctuations.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate and emphasising its importance for future world development. Traidcraft appears to have been hit by a perfect storm in so far as Brexit and currency fluctuations have damaged its business model, and uncertainty in world markets and trade agreements, and changes in consumer purchasing behaviour, have conspired to undermine it. Does she agree that, given the importance of Traidcraft’s small businesses in taking people in the most vulnerable countries out of poverty, there is a strong case for the Department for International Trade and DFID to look at developing a model of support that will ensure that such businesses survive in a very difficult international environment?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, and I will touch on some of those points later.

Brexit, as we have said, continues to affect the company’s trading. When I spoke to Traidcraft’s chief executive, Robin Roth, shortly after the announcement of a potential closure, I asked what I could do to help to secure Traidcraft’s future. He told me that the best thing that I could do would be to encourage people to buy from Traidcraft in the run-up to Christmas, as a strong Christmas—the Christmas catalogues were nearly ready—would allow Traidcraft to look to a future for the organisation.

That is what I have tried to do locally, and—with the help of my right hon. Friend, the Member for East Ham—in this House. I hope that many hon. Members will have bought at least some of their Christmas gifts from the Traidcraft catalogue, which we sent to all Members some weeks ago. Traidcraft do a fine line in quality socks as well as more decorative crafts, and they have certainly featured on my Christmas list.

I am glad that Traidcraft supporters have, I am told, responded magnificently. That has meant that the company has been able to put together a plan for the future that will see the company refocus and survive. Sadly, many of the jobs in Gateshead will be lost, the warehousing will be outsourced and there will be a focus on food and related goods and a very much narrower range of crafts, together with a new emphasis on consumers buying co-operatively. I look forward to seeing the new “Traidcraft 2” develop and grow, and will continue to support it.

Traidcraft, as part of the fair trade movement, has some asks of the Government. I thank the Minister for inquiring in advance whether there were any particular issues for which he could prepare. I do not believe that any of the asks will come as surprises to the Minister, although I was unable to give him that notice.

First, the Government need to reassure the many producers and farmers in vulnerable developing countries that the UK will put in place measures to preserve market access—if necessary, unilaterally—to avoid disruption. They urge the Government to provide reassurance that the needs of poorer countries and vulnerable stakeholders will be taken into consideration as future trade policy is developed and implemented.

Jeremy Lefroy: Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the great benefits of the work of Traidcraft, and others, has been that it works on the ground with producers and farmers, and enables them not only to increase their incomes, but to improve their quality and so much else? That engagement on the ground with producers and
small-scale farmers, with whom I have worked for 30 years or more, is vital, because it means that money gets to the grassroots. So often, money does not seem to trickle down. This is money, support and agricultural extension work going in at the grassroots.

**Liz Twist:** I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I agree with him on all those points. One of the important things about Traidcraft has been that personal connection through the “meet the producers” tours, and being able to see in the catalogue who produces the goods. We must never forget the impact on individuals of the work of Traidcraft and other fair trade organisations. I hope that the Minister will reassure us that DFID will play its part in continuing that work.

The UK has a strong record of using its aid programme to support business development. The Government should continue their development work in that area and re- emphasise the inclusive approach that we have talked about within that, through a clear gender focus and support for small and medium-sized enterprises, ensuring that the trade and business environment enables them to voice their needs and to thrive.

As Traidcraft goes forward, it will look to offer consumers even greater transparency. As part of the review of the Modern Slavery Act 2015, the Government should update the official guidance to encourage companies to publish where they buy their goods from and the wages of their supply chain workers. The Government should consider legislation to make human rights due diligence mandatory, so that we can have that transparency and see exactly what is being done.

Finally, Parliament is considering the Agriculture Bill, which is perhaps not in the Minister’s immediate purview, although I am sure that he can have some input.

**The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Alistair Burt):** I have a lot of farming constituents—trust me.

**Liz Twist:** Yes. As Parliament considers the Agriculture Bill, the Government could table amendments that establish more comprehensive regulation, supporting fairer purchasing practices all the way along agricultural supply chains.

Earlier this month, I went to the Traidcraft warehouse sale in Team Valley and, yes, picked up some bargains, although it feels wrong to do that knowing the difficulties that the company has faced. While there, I spoke to a member of staff who was tidying up the shelves and said how sad I found it. He surprised me by saying that it was not sad; Traidcraft plc has a plan and a future to look forward to, although there will not be the same range of crafts.

Although I was surprised, I am sure that his was the right attitude, and it will ensure that the company has a long and sustainable future—different from what it has been, but still upholding and strengthening the fair trade principles that it has been instrumental in developing, and continuing to work with like-minded organisations in the Fairtrade Foundation. I wish it every success.

**Several hon. Members rose**—

**Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair):** Order. The debate can last until 11 o’clock. I have to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 10.28 am, and the guideline limits for the Front Benchers are 10 minutes for the Scottish National party, 10 minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition, 10 minutes for the Minister, and then we will hear again from Liz Twist to wind up. Until 10.28 am, it is Back-Bench time. Our first contributor will be Jim Shannon.

9.49 am

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I congratulate the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on securing this debate and on succinctly setting the scene. We are here because we have an interest in fair trade and Traidcraft and the good that they bring to those who produce the products that we use in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I pay special tribute to the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who has a deep interest in this matter—a practical, physical interest—from his past work. He has hands-on knowledge of how it can benefit people.

We live in a dog-eat-dog world, to use terminology that we have in Northern Ireland. I frown upon it, but it is sought after by some. There seems to be no shame in doing someone over as long as you come out on top. To succeed, people are expected to trample on other people, instead of working with them. Traidcraft and Fairtrade are essential, because they bring us back to where we should be. All of us in this Chamber are people of faith and understand what it means, and therefore we have an interest in people. That is one of the reasons why we are here to participate in this debate. We also have an interest in people across the world.

I think it was Margaret Thatcher who referred to us as a nation of shopkeepers. Well, my family were shopkeepers. My dad was a shopkeeper—he was one of the first to go into the grocery trade. At that time it was VG—it is now Spar—and it was one of the first grocery groups in Northern Ireland. He had a wee shop in Ballywalter. I call it a wee shop—it was a big shop in those days, but it is probably a wee shop today. He was known as a man who operated with fair pricing. I want to make this illustration, because it is important. There was always the ability to take advantage by putting the prices up, as we lived in a rural community and not many people had their own cars, so they could not get to the big towns easily. That is how it was in the ’60s and early ’70s. My dad could have hiked the prices, but he chose not to. I remember him saying, “James”—everybody else calls me Jim, but my dad christened me James—“we may never be rich, but we will always have enough. We will never put someone in need as a sacrifice to our greed.” He had a very clear message as a shopkeeper. It was not about excessive profits, his grandeur or his lifestyle; it was about producing things for other people.

My dad ran another business that I remember very well. He probably supplied furniture, carpets, lino and blinds to every house in the villages of Ballywalter, Greyabbey, Carrowdore, Kircubbin, Ballyhalbert and Portavogie. He did what we called “cull” in those days—a form of borrowing, with so much paid back. He was a very generous person. His ethic of fairness to people is one that Fairtrade and Traidcraft share. It is so important.
Jeremy Lefroy: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the great supporters and promoters of fair trade in retail over the past 30 years is the co-operative movement? Alongside Traidcraft and others, it has really taken forward fair trade and made it a household name in the United Kingdom.

Jim Shannon: I wholeheartedly agree. The hon. Gentleman brings wisdom and knowledge to this type of debate— to every debate, but to this one in particular. I thank him for that.

Unfortunately, that school of thinking has been somewhat lost, as some of the big companies look to the dividends of their shareholders and do not concern themselves with how suppliers lower the bottom line to meet their profit margin need. It is good that some companies have realised that they have to adhere to a moral compass. That is why Fairtrade and Traidcraft exist. I thank everyone who works in those wonderful organisations and takes part in what they do.

I am given to understand that there has to be a cut in staff numbers. That is unfortunate, and I encourage the venture to hold fast and keep doing good. There is a verse in scripture that always encouraged me: it says that we should not be weary in doing good, for we shall reap what we diligently sow. It is my belief that there are countless families in communities throughout the world who are reaping the benefits of what these organisations sow in fairness, respect, hard work and honesty.

Before making this contribution, I was thinking of the advert on TV for Fairtrade coffee, which tells the story of the young boys in the fields. If they were not doing that farming and that work, the alternative would be to go into criminal activity. By buying Fairtrade and Traidcraft goods, we enable people in other parts of the world to gain a wage, to have families and to grow, and we also keep them away from criminality.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): My hon. Friend is taking about the short-term difficulties that Traidcraft faces. The decline in the pound has hit Traidcraft for obvious reasons, but does he agree that, even if it means paying an extra 50p or £1 for a product just to keep it all going while the pound strengthens again, we should do that. I thank him for that comment. As always, he brings knowledge and wisdom to the debate.

I read a briefing by Traidcraft that said that, as Traidcraft plc goes forward, it will be striving to offer consumers ever greater levels of transparency about where its products come from and where its money goes. Hon. Members in this Chamber probably know where the products come from and the benefits of them, but it is important that others see that too. Fair trade is increasingly seen as the norm for all businesses. Traidcraft Exchange is also encouraging mainstream businesses, through its “Who picked my tea?” campaign, to know and make public information about their suppliers. There are small things we can do to assist that. I believe that that is vital in providing workers and community groups in supplier companies with the information and opportunity to hold companies to account for the standards that are expected in their supply chains—for example, with reference to working conditions and vulnerability to modern slavery.

There is a real need to ensure that workers’ conditions are at a good standard. Traidcraft has said:

“We urge Government as part of the review of the Modern Slavery Act to update the official guidance to encourage companies, as part of their reporting, to publish where they buy their goods from and the wages of their supply chain workers. We also encourage Government to consider legislation that would make Human Rights Due Diligence mandatory.”

I am my party’s human rights spokesperson, so like all hon. Members in this Chamber and others outside it, I have a deep interest in this issue. Therefore, the issue of fair wages and good working conditions are important to me.

I am pleased that, in this debate, we have a shadow Minister who has a deep interest in this issue and a Minister who understands it better than most. I know that both their contributions will be worth listening to, and that they will respond to our concerns. I have no doubt that they will both reply very positively and supportively.

I support Traidcraft in what it is asking the Government to do. There is an onus on us to ensure that we do not support the trafficking and ill-treatment of children or adults throughout the world. I sincerely believe that we must do more and be more for those who have no voices and no one willing to stand up for them. As often happens in this House, we are the voice of the voiceless. This debate gives us the opportunity to do just that.

I say well done to all in Traidcraft and Fairtrade for how far they have brought us. It heartens me that my own grandchildren—those who have children and grandchildren have probably found the same—already know what the Fairtrade symbol is. It is encouraging that grandchildren remind people of what the Fairtrade symbol is and what it means. Perhaps their parents or grandparents do not know, but it is good to know that the children of today—in both primary school and secondary school—know about the Fairtrade symbol. That encourages us to buy things with the symbol. That needs to continue. We need to teach a generation to be cognisant of the fact that an extra 50p or £1 on an item could make the difference between a child slave and a paid wage. That is the importance of what we are doing. We encourage people to purchase Traidcraft and Fairtrade items.

I offer my full support to those who wish simply to do the right thing, and to do all in their power to ensure that the people they buy from also do the right thing. We need to make people aware legislatively that “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” in the process of their purchases will no longer be possible or, indeed, acceptable.

I again apologise, Mr Hollobone. I have asked your permission to leave early, because I have a meeting with a Minister. I apologise that I will not be here at the end of the debate for the contributions of the shadow Minister, the Minister and the mover of the debate.
Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist) on the initiative to secure this debate and on what she said. I also very much agree with what the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said.

I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, where it is recorded that I am the unpaid chair of the Traidcraft Foundation trustees. I will say a little more about the work of that body later in my remarks.

In 2007, Sainsbury’s announced that it would in future sell only Fairtrade bananas, a commitment that it has maintained to the present day, with 100 million a year of those bananas coming from St Lucia. At the time, a press article described the impact of that decision, under the headline, “Saving St Lucia: UK supermarket sweeps up 100m bananas”: “Just seven years ago the banana farmers of the Caribbean island of St Lucia were hanging up their machetes and ready to turn their steep hillsides back to forest. UK subsidies for their fruit were doomed, they couldn’t compete with giant ‘dollar’ bananas from South American plantations, and a dying industry seemed to provide only back-breaking work for scant reward.

Today, the island where bananas are not so much a crop but a way of life is celebrating. Just about every St Lucian banana sold for export now commands a premium price and European supermarket are queuing for more. Money is going into run-down schools, the banana sheds are being repaired and the farmers can scarcely believe the turn round in their fortunes.”

A remarkable change had taken place. The article went on:

“In a reversal of the situation nine years ago where only the Co-op was prepared to stock fair trade products”—

I join the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) in paying tribute to its role—

“the big supermarkets now openly compete with each other to be socially conscious.”

How did that turnabout occur? What was it that changed the retail market in the UK to deliver such huge benefits to struggling farmers in the developing world growing bananas, coffee, tea, cocoa and other products? In a word, it was Traidcraft.

Traidcraft, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon said, was established 40 years ago. It described itself as a “Christian response to poverty”. It started with handcrafted items from Bangladesh, and still sells those. Together with the chair of Traidcraft, Ram Gidoomal, my wife and I visited some of those producers in Bangladesh in 2012. Traidcraft has always had a focus on support for women producers as the most effective way to raise family incomes.

Traidcraft started with those craft products. In the 1980s, the idea of fair trade was pioneered in the Netherlands with coffee, and Traidcraft brought the idea to the UK. What happened, in effect, was that people who ran church bookstalls were persuaded to offer some crafts and fair trade items for sale on the edge of their collections of books. You might be forgiven, Mr Hollobone, for thinking that a few bookstalls in draughty church halls around the country were never going to change anything much but, ultimately, they brought about that change of fortune for the banana farmers of St Lucia, even though neither they nor Traidcraft ever sold any bananas.

Voluntary, community-based support, initially in churches and then increasingly elsewhere—for example, Fairtrade schools—enabled the fair trade movement to get a toehold to start with, to survive and to go on to flourish. Today, fair trade has a large niche in the UK retail market—Fairtrade sales volumes rose 7% last year.

Traidcraft established itself as a plc. As my hon. Friend pointed out, it has 4,500 individual shareholders, buys groceries and craft items from more than 70 producer groups in some 30 countries, and sells them through community fair traders online, dedicated fair trade shops and mainstream retailers. To secure Traidcraft’s focus on its core mission, as a Christian response to poverty, it established the Traidcraft Foundation, which I chair. It has a golden share in the plc to ensure that the initial focus is maintained.

Traidcraft Exchange, the sister charity which does a lot of the producer support work that the hon. Member for Stafford rightly highlighted in his intervention, was established in 1986. It continues to thrive, to support low-income producers in Africa and Asia to grow their business, and to campaign in the UK. For example, a few years ago it played a key role in the campaign to establish the Groceries Code Adjudicator to secure fairer access to the retail market. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) in her intervention mentioned the “Who picked my tea?” campaign that it led, drawing the attention of consumers to questions about the working conditions and circumstances of those who pick the tea that we all enjoy.

Traidcraft played a key role in the establishment of the Fairtrade Foundation in 1992. It also developed the Geobar, which proved to be a phenomenally successful product, I am pleased to say. The Geobar generated substantial commercial success for the company and underpinned its activities for a long time. In recent years, however, as my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon pointed out, Traidcraft has struggled to make a profit for the reasons that she set out: the wider challenges in the UK market, Brexit and the fall in the value of the pound.

Traidcraft had quite a specific role as a pioneer in fair trade and, with fair trade being taken up widely by retailers—supermarkets have lots of their own-brand fair trade products these days—the position of Traidcraft in establishing its own niche and commercially viable market has been a difficult one. It struggled to make profits. Last summer, Traidcraft under its then recently appointed chief executive, Robin Roth, after some disappointing sales figures, took the view that things could not carry on. It was decided to rethink the business model, to downsize radically—losing more than 60 jobs, as my hon. Friend pointed out—and in the new year to go forward with only 12 staff, outsourced warehousing and a focus on the grocery business. I am pleased to say that Traidcraft has had a good autumn of sales. There has been tremendous support from the community in my hon. Friend’s constituency and in the north-east more generally, which has helped to buoy it as well.

Fairtrade continues to do well in the UK. I have referred to the fact that its sales volumes rose by 7% last year. It is important to recognise that, notwithstanding the difficulties that Traidcraft has been through, fair trade continues to enjoy strong consumer support.
Traidcraft has a remarkable story. Its pioneering role helped to create fair trade as an enduring segment of the retail market. Committed volunteers in churches led the way, but the support for fair trade is now very widely based, placing it squarely in the mainstream of today’s retail marketplace. Polling shows that awareness of and trust in the Fairtrade mark are at the highest level they have ever been since the Fairtrade Foundation was established in 1992 and started polling on the views of the Fairtrade mark a couple of years later.

Traidcraft has been through a difficult phase—hopefully, it will emerge leaner and stronger with new investment in the new year—but the values that Traidcraft has championed enjoy greater support than ever in the UK. I hope that in his remarks, the Minister—I am pleased to see him in particular in his place for this debate—will confirm that the Department for International Trade will want to see these values as it develops future trade policy. Such decisions are crucial for farmers and producers in the least developed countries and in other developing countries around the world.

10.11 am

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blydon (Liz Twist) on securing this important debate on a subject that I am sure we all have a great level of agreement about. She talked about the personal significance of Traidcraft to her as a customer, the future of fair trade and the importance that Traidcraft has had for women in affected communities. The lives that have been changed in those communities show how important it has been.

The hon. Lady also talked about the ability of the products to reach thousands of homes and communities, and the sense of the overarching campaign for justice that is included in fair trade. Very importantly given the situation at Traidcraft, she talked about encouraging people to buy from Traidcraft in the run-up to Christmas, and the fact that it need not be a time of real darkness because there are hopes that, through restructuring, it can look to a brighter future.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place—he explained that he had to leave—talked about companies such as Traidcraft bringing some light into a highly competitive, sometimes uncaring market. He spoke about his father and the need to think about the needs of others—the importance of an ethical approach to retail that sometimes becomes a bit lost in society these days. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of fair wages and working conditions, wherever those people may be—something we should all keep working together on. He talked about the need to challenge the “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” approach to retail that can sometimes pervade.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) talked about fair trade being brought to supermarkets and the role—repeated by others—of the co-operative movement in facilitating that. The right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) made an interesting speech about the fact that St Lucia’s economy was, in effect, saved by Sainsbury’s decision to sell only its bananas. He also paid tribute to the co-operative movement for leading the way and talked about the gradual expansion of fair trade and Traidcraft’s role in that expansion throughout the nations of the UK. He asked the Minister to uphold the values that have been set for the future in his work. I am sure we will hear about that.

Scotland is a fair trade nation. I proudly represent a fair trade city in a region with a fair trade local authority. Inverness became a fair trade city in 2006 and is proudly joined by the highland fair trade communities of Skye, Broadford, Ullapool, Strathpeffer, Dornoch and Dunvegan. As a good global citizen, Scotland has always been committed to playing its part in addressing poverty and fair trade at home and afar, and was one of the first countries in the world to be named a fair trade nation. However, I must give a special mention for Wales, which was the first ever fair trade nation, gaining its accreditation in 2008.

In Scotland, the Scottish Fair Trade Forum has been particularly instrumental in driving forward our fair trade nation agenda. We believe in encouraging business to play its part in promoting and respecting human rights, working with partner countries to support development through trade. Transparency is vital to ensure that our trade policy is carried out in a way that is beneficial to all nations of the UK and consistent with international development goals.

It takes serious commitment for a nation to achieve fair trade nation status. In Scotland, those commitments included all seven Scottish cities and at least 55% of local authority areas having fair trade status; all 32 local authority areas and at least 55% of towns with a population of 5,000 or more must have active fair trade groups working towards fair trade status. The percentage of those with fair trade status is now at 80%. Similarly, at least 60% of higher education institutions must have active fair trade groups working towards fair trade status.

In addition, the Scottish Parliament and Government must use, promote and make available Fairtrade products internally, and actively promote Fairtrade fortnight each year. Fair trade has to be promoted in schools through the curriculum, procurement and other possible means. Schools, further education institutions, faith groups, trade unions, business networks and voluntary and youth organisations must pledge to use and promote fair trade; finally, 75% of people must buy a Fairtrade product every year, and 40% of people must regularly buy Fairtrade products.

A commitment to fair trade is not about just qualifying for a status; it is an ongoing commitment to tackling poverty across the world and support those worse off than ourselves through the promotion of Fairtrade products. In Scotland, the drive to become a fair trade nation took commitment from people, Government, businesses, public bodies and community, and cross-party work from politicians across Scotland to promote fair trade. It is organisations such as Traidcraft, as we have heard, that have led the way to allow that to happen, which is why we are all deeply saddened by the difficulties it has been going through.

In a briefing for this debate, the Fairtrade Foundation described the Traidcraft plc. approach to fair trade as:“an inspiration to many and the approach that it pioneered in 1979 is now also being taken forward by other brands and businesses that choose to trade fairly. The wider Fairtrade sector, owes a great debt to Traidcraft and their many volunteers, especially
within the faith communities, and the Fairtrade Foundation wishes them every success with the plan proposed last month for a slimmed-down Traidcraft with fair trade, community buying, transparency and ‘market disruption’ at its heart”.

I am sure we all share those sentiments. Traidcraft’s contribution to fair trade has been wide reaching and felt across the world. As we have heard, it was one of the founding members of the Fairtrade Foundation, which was established in 1992 with a vision to make trade fair and to secure a better deal for farmers and workers. It has educated us, enabled us and ensured that fair trade has remained on the political agenda in all the nations of the UK.

Others have mentioned that Traidcraft, which is based in Gateshead’s Team Valley, put 67 of its 68 staff on notice of redundancy in September after a series of factors caused it to lurch into a financial crisis. In early November, it announced a rescue plan in which the company will slash its product lines and keep just 12 employees to be a voice float. I wish, as I am sure everyone here does, the management all the success with the recovery plan. I hope—and believe—that this iconic organisation can have better times ahead. I also hope that in his response, the Minister will share the action that his Government are taking to support Traidcraft through these extremely trying times, especially given that the chief executive officer cited Brexit as one of the main factors in its recent difficulties.

10.19 am

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone, in this important and timely debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon (Liz Twis) on securing it, and I associate myself with her comments and concerns. I thank the other Members who spoke. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned having derived his fair trade values from his father, who was a shopkeeper, and urged us to do more to give a voice for the voiceless. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) spoke of retailers committing to sell Fairtrade items in the UK and Traidcraft’s role in making that happen. I also thank him and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for the work they do through the APPG for Fairtrade. It was a pleasure to hear the strength of support among all Members for just and fair trade in which workers and countries are not exploited.

Let me start by welcoming the work that Traidcraft—and, indeed, everyone who buys Fairtrade—does to ensure justice in the consumer-producer relationship. Fair trading initiatives have led the way in ensuring that the true costs of produce are not paid by people living in poverty and insecurity through exploitative and dangerous working conditions, being ripped off by powerful global agribusinesses, or environmental destruction and degradation. However, fair trade must be just the start of a broader move towards more just global trading relationships, so it is deeply disappointing to learn that many social businesses and smaller fair trade companies are struggling as they absorb the hit of the pound’s depreciation as a result of the Brexit negotiations. They have been unable and unwilling to pass those costs down the supply chain as many larger companies have done.

A bad deal for Traidcraft would not only be damaging for its workers in the UK but contribute to worsening the position of vulnerable people around the world. If the Government continue to flounder in their attempt to finalise a Brexit deal, developing countries will face an estimated £1 billion in additional taxes on imports. That will foster poverty and inequality, burden already struggling countries with further debts, and deny workers their rightful access to living wages and robust labour rights. Will the Minister say what steps the Government are taking to ensure that those social businesses are able to continue to produce and sell Fairtrade products? Why did the Government see fit to reduce funding to promote and encourage ethical and fair trading?

The Fairtrade market in the UK is worth more than £1.6 billion, so it is clear that it is not a niche movement. Rather, it is a powerful example of the British public’s support for the benefits of trade being shared with workers around the globe, not funneled into a narrow pool of corporations. That is further emphasised by the breadth of support for fair trade across the United Kingdom. Hundreds of individual businesses across the UK help to empower fair trade farmers and workers in developing countries. There are more than 10,000 local campaigning groups, including more than 600 towns and 1,000 schools as well as universities and faith groups, boosting awareness and understanding of international trade issues up and down the country.

Fair trade and its supporters in the UK are part of a global fair trade system that supports 1.66 million fair trade workers in 73 countries around the world. The UK should be proud of its role in the formation of that movement, which has become truly global. We need to uphold that legacy, and we should use those groups and the practical and real successes of the fair trade movement to drive wider reform of international trade conventions so they are built on equality and justice.

It is important to remember that what we are talking about goes beyond what can be achieved by the fair trade movement alone. Trade relationships between the richest and poorest countries are at the heart of uneven global economic development. We in the Labour party want to introduce long-term structural change to the global economy to eradicate poverty and inequality. We want to work hand in hand with the world’s poorest countries to ensure that trade works for them and us, rather than forcing them to be beholden to corporate interests or always to give British companies an advantage regardless of whether that is good for domestic development strategies.

We know that, when done justly, economic development initiatives can lift people out of poverty, tackle inequalities and help to change lives. However, the Department for International Development’s economic development strategy fails to do that, instead falling back on old, discredited tropes about free trade alone succeeding in addressing those problems. Will the Minister explain why DFID’s economic development strategy does not recognise fair and ethical trade as a cornerstone of economic policy?

The Government know full well that when the UK and other countries industrialised, they used the kinds of industrial development strategies that are now withheld from the poorest countries. Will the Minister tell us what impact assessments are done on trade deals, and will be done on any future deals, to ensure that they support development targets, the national development strategies of southern countries and poverty reduction?
I am pleased also that tribute was paid to my good friend, Ram Gidoomal, who has been an influence on a variety of positive issues in this country for many years. I am delighted that such a friend of many decades is able to listen attentively to this debate. We certainly appreciate his relationship with Traidcraft and all he has done with it over the years. In my constituency, I have been to St Andrew’s Church many times with the Fairtrade group in Biggleswade, and churches throughout north Bedfordshire—particularly North Bedfordshire Methodist Circuit—have been very involved. We can pay tribute to those who have acted locally and nationally on this.

Let me proceed with my remarks, into which I will incorporate some of the comments made by colleagues. When Traidcraft was created in 1979, we undoubtedly lived in a very different time. Today’s hyper-interconnected world was just emerging, and more business was carried out using locally sourced products. Now companies operate through a complex and sophisticated web of supply chains that span the planet. Products are created and assembled across multiple jurisdictions, and delivered to our front doors within hours of us purchasing them online. We have much more understanding of who is creating the things we buy, and about the lives they live and the challenges they face. At the sharpest end, that leads to images of children working in sweatshops, or the appalling Rana Plaza tragedy in Bangladesh.

Today, ethically minded consumers shop in line with their values in numerous ways, for example by following a vegan diet, choosing organic cotton or using social enterprises. The ethical market in the UK is now worth £81.3 billion per annum. Millennials, in particular, are spearheading the idea that companies should operate in a responsible way, and 66% say that they would pay more for sustainable brands—that paragraph was undoubtedly written by one of my millennials, but those of us who are older also recognise that we played our part in the past by supporting Traidcraft and Fairtrade, and the way they got going. There is no doubt, however, that that pioneering work by the previous generation has been well picked up by the millennials of today, and we congratulate them on taking it forward. In the late ’70s, Traidcraft was one of the first organisations to shine a light on the working conditions of those who made our products. That is a vital legacy, and a theme that continues through the work of commerce today.

**Stephen Timms:** I am enjoying the points the Minister is making. Will he also pay tribute to the role of Traidcraft in establishing standards for corporate reporting? I think Traidcraft was the first plc to publish a proper social impact report, which was very influential across the entire plc sector.

**Alistair Burt:** I will indeed. Such reporting has increased the sense of responsibility not only of companies, but of consumers who ask the right questions and ensure that those delivering products recognise the need to respond to their concerns. Those reporting changes were fundamental.

The influence of Traidcraft and Fairtrade is felt not just in hundreds of churches and community centres across the country where their products are a mainstay, or in the growth of the wider fair trade market, but across millions of consumer decisions in the UK that
are made with sustainability in mind. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about values, and it is no surprise to those of us who have had contact with him to learn where his values come from. I cannot think of a better fit between an individual Member talking about his upbringing and the values he incorporates into his life, and what he does constantly in this House through his remarks and determination to secure the best of human rights, tolerance and fairness. It is a great mix, and I am not surprised at his connection with Fairtrade.

As the hon. Member for Blaydon said, Traidcraft has reached a crossroads in its journey, and with so many ways for consumers to express their values, it is rightly looking to explore new ways to improve the lives of poor people across the world. We wish Traidcraft well. The hon. Lady concluded her remarks by speaking of the ray of hope mentioned by the worker who also spoke of a new challenge, and undoubtedly that challenge will be faced with the same degree of determination that was possessed by those who set off on this course in the first place. I therefore hope we can have confidence for Traidcraft in future.

Wherever this challenge leads the organisation, it is important that the rest of us continue to strive for the principles that shine through its work—to ensure that trade is inclusive and sustainable, that any jobs created are quality ones, and that developing countries can truly grasp the opportunities of trade to reduce poverty and build a safer, healthier, and more prosperous world.

In that, the work of the Department for International Development, alongside the Department for International Trade, is key, particularly at this critical moment in our history. DFID initiatives, such as the responsible, accountable and transparent enterprise programme—I will say more about that later in my remarks—work to promote responsible and sustainable business standards, and to identify and tackle modern slavery and child labour in global supply chains. With more than 40 million men, women and children trapped in modern slavery around the world, that is vital work. We must continue to tackle permissive environments that enable the criminality of modern slavery to thrive, which includes supporting businesses to clean up supply chains in key sectors where slavery persists.

Let me turn to some of the questions raised during the debate. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) and other colleagues spoke about the impact on this issue of our leaving the EU. As we leave the EU, the UK has a unique opportunity to shape our trade and development work for the benefit of developing countries, and I am proud of the work taking place across the whole of Government to ensure that development and global prosperity are at the heart of future UK trade.

Stephen Timms: Will the Minister give way?

Alistair Burt: I will, although I have more to say.

Stephen Timms: I am grateful. The Minister may well have been about to answer this point, but the Government have confirmed that they will continue to provide the poorest and least developed countries with quota-free, duty-free access to the UK market, which I welcome. Can he give any reassurance to producers in other countries—not the least developed, but poorer countries—that EU-negotiated economic partnerships and free trade agreements will be rolled over so that after Brexit, producers in those countries will continue to have the access to the UK market that they currently enjoy?

Alistair Burt: Clearly the right hon. Gentleman has had prior sight of my remarks if he is asking such a perceptive question at this time. I will come to that issue in a moment.

Our immediate priority on leaving the EU is to deliver continuity in our trading arrangements, so that developing-country firms exporting to the UK do not face new and damaging trade barriers—that is one benefit of securing a deal on leaving the EU, rather than no deal, and the Government will determinedly strive for that, as will all Ministers. To that end, we will put in place a UK trade preferences scheme that will, as a minimum, provide the same level of access as the current EU scheme by granting duty-free, quota-free access to at least developed countries, and generous tariff reductions to around 25 other developing countries. We will also seek to replicate the effects of the EU's economic partnership agreements, which are development-focused trade deals with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. We aim to maintain the preferential access to UK services markets for least developed countries that is guaranteed through the LDC services waiver—that, I was pleased to note, is a better deal than the one currently offered through the World Trade Organisation, which is an important consideration.

As well as maintaining preferential trade access for around 100 developing countries, those trade arrangements also embed the principles of inclusive and sustainable trade that Traidcraft and others have long argued for. For example, the UK's trade preferences scheme will include an enhanced tier similar to that of the EU, which grants special tariff reductions to developing countries in return for progress against ratifying and implementing international conventions on human rights, labour rights, the environment and good governance.

More trade does not have to come at the expense of workers, the environment, human rights or the growth of least developed countries, and the Government firmly believe that it is in everyone's interest to avoid any kind of race to the bottom on standards. That point was at the heart of the remarks by the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston when she asked what more might be included in deals, and my sense is that as these opportunities evolve, we should all press for the highest standards. As I said earlier, we have a minimum baseline, but that is not where the United Kingdom should be. We should be able to operate to higher standards, and we should work through them. My sense is that DFID and the Department for International Trade recognise that and wish to ensure it is the case. There is much work to do for these new agreements, and the House would not be fair if it took the bottom line minimum standard that we "must" have in place as our intention or ambition, because I am sure we will be keen for it to be developed.

The hon. Member for Strangford asked about modern slavery, and I shall say a little more about that. At last year's UN General Assembly the Prime Minister launched the "Call to Action" to end forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking, in which specific commitments are set out, to address modern slavery at the national and international level. It has been endorsed
by 43 countries\footnote{[Official Report, 7 January 2019, Vol. 652, c. 2MC.]} so far. On the International Day for the Abolition of Slavery, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development announced a £40 million package of new funding, forming part of the overall £150 million spend that the Prime Minister committed the Government to at the UN. That package of support will help more than 500,000 vulnerable men, women and children, and includes £13 million for the second phase of the work in freedom programme, the UK’s £20 million contribution to the global fund to end modern slavery, and the £7 million of DFID support to Nigeria.

That is all in addition to existing DFID programmes such as the £8 million regional women and girls protection programme operating in Greece and the Balkans, protecting girl and women refugees by providing shelters and strengthening national counter-trafficking mechanisms, and the £22 million\footnote{A specific request to the Government was to update the official guidance to encourage companies to publish where they buy their goods from and the wages of their supply chain workers, and to consider legislation to make human rights due diligence mandatory. Are the Government prepared to make that commitment?} responsible business programme, which is spreading responsible business approaches. That international strategy, overseen by the Prime Minister’s taskforce, has the aim of driving down slavery in source countries to the UK, and others of high prevalence, and effecting change through multilateral channels.

**Alistair Burt:** My remarks have gone even wider than the copy that was obviously supplied to the right hon. Member for East Ham. DFID has recently updated its supplier code of conduct to require companies to sign up to the UN global compact, thereby promoting responsible businesses and committing companies to take action to address such issues. Responsible business is about more than just small or one-off projects that create win-win outcomes for business and society; it is the expansion of firms’ core business in developing markets, embracing socially and environmentally positive conduct through supply chains. That is why we have updated the code. We are encouraging businesses to contribute to economic development in ways that are socially responsible and environmentally sound, and that help to defeat modern slavery.

Hon. Members raised the question of gender focus, and all DFID private sector work goes through a gender lens. We recognise the changes that have taken place, as well as the particular pressures on women when working through these issues. The Commonwealth Development Corporation has a gender strategy, and DFID has its Work and Opportunities for Women programme. As I have explained, there are specific programmes directed at supporting women.

The hon. Member for Blaydon asked us to consider legislation to make human rights due diligence mandatory. That is a matter on which we must encourage, rather than legislate. We are encouraging better reporting on human rights, through grants to Shift and the Ethical Trading Initiative. We also rank human rights performance through corporate human rights benchmarking. We do not have plans at present to make that mandatory through legislation. It would be difficult to enforce. However, the question of how to promote that and to work with others on it is much on our minds. I think that is important.

There is more we must do to ensure that the benefits of trade are spread widely, levelling the playing field for those on the margins. That is important between countries, which is why the Government have a range of programmes to support the least developed countries to benefit from global trade, including our flagship trade facilitation programme TradeMark East Africa, and the recently launched Commonwealth Standards Network.

**Stephen Timms:** The Minister is being generous in giving way. May I press him a little further on the question of access to the UK market for developing countries other than the least developed? I think what he has said to us is that the Government’s aim is to make sure that after Brexit, access will be available to other developing countries at least at the level provided by EU-negotiated economic partnership and free trade agreements. Can he confirm that that is their intention?

Will the Minister also tell us a little more about what the Government are doing to ensure that that aim can be delivered? For example, why can they not simply announce, “Yes, everyone is going to carry on with the access they have at the moment”? Perhaps he can tell us a little more about the mechanics of what needs to be done to deliver on the aim he set out, which I very much welcome.

**Alistair Burt:** What we have been able to say publicly is what I stated just now about the bottom line and the roll-over of existing agreements. As to the aspiration, plainly that must come through the work that will be done to develop individual arrangements with states post Brexit. I am not sure there is any more detail that I can provide at this stage. If there is on reflection, I will write to the right hon. Gentleman and make it clear.

The hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston asked what DFID already does, why we do what we do and whether we could do more. Perhaps I may take colleagues through the responsible, accountable and transparent enterprise programme that I mentioned earlier. RATE is our primary mechanism for promoting responsible and sustainable business standards. It works through providing accountable grants to organisations such as Fairtrade, the Ethical Trading Initiative and the ISEAL Alliance to work with businesses to improve their performance on the relevant issues. RATE also delivers DFID’s main offer on identifying and tackling modern slavery and child labour in global supply chains.

To go into some of the details, through Humanity United’s Working Capital fund we are providing seed funding to early-stage technology initiatives aimed at increased transparency in supply chains, including Provenance, an app that tracks the journey of a product from the source to the shelf. We are also partnering with ShareAction on the Workforce Disclosure Initiative, a global coalition of investors with more than $13 trillion of assets under management, which is demanding better data from its portfolio companies on workforce practices. DFID is also a founding donor of the World Benchmarking...
Alliance, the world’s first publicly available set of corporate benchmarks—to reinforce a point made by the right hon. Member for East Ham—that will rank multinational companies on their contribution to the sustainable development goals. Through our grant to the Ethical Trading Initiative, we are helping companies such as Tesco and ASOS to uphold the ETI base code to eradicate modern slavery in their supply chains and ensure that purchasing practices are fair. We are ensuring that workers at the bottom of the supply chain know their rights and can exercise their voice through worker participation mechanisms.

In all those ways, DFID is working to deliver what has been called for in this debate, and we intend to continue to do so. New opportunities are coming in the future. As the House will know, I am very much in favour of a deal—an agreement—that means that if we are to leave the EU, we leave it on good terms that are beneficial to us and to those we work with, and that maintain the highest standards. It should not be impossible to do that. The United Kingdom, both within the EU and outside it, will not get involved in a race to the bottom—or certainly not with the support of the Government and the vast majority of Members. Fair trade, and the work that is done on it, will be a good test of how the UK of the future moves forward and meets the challenges.

A thought has come to me about the question raised by the right hon. Member for East Ham. I assure him that we are maintaining access and considering opportunities to make improvements once we have left the EU. As I mentioned, I may write to him and clarify the matter further.

More trade on fair terms is a key engine of poverty reduction. The Government will build on their track record on trade for development, we will continue to be a champion of free and inclusive trade when others may have turned their backs on it, and we will not shy away from issues of injustice or exploitation where they arise in the system. We cannot do that alone, however. Real progress will be based on partnership between Government, business, and, of course, movements such as fair trade that focus public attention where it is needed. We must all work together to create a trade system that works for everyone, including the poorest, and that eliminates poverty through inclusive economic growth.

10.49 am

Liz Twist: It seems to me that there has been a good deal of agreement on the issue of fair trade from all sides in this debate. All hon. Members who have taken part, whom I thank, have recognised the social impact and significance of fair trade standards and the use, as the Minister said, of fair trade as a key tool in poverty reduction.

It is amazing that, as many hon. Members have said, those fair trade volunteers standing in draughty church halls up and down the nation should have produced a real blast that has changed things for the better, leading to big business adopting fair trade standards and affecting producers in faraway countries, such as those banana producers in St Lucia mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms). It has been a real turnaround.

Another issue that was picked up widely in the debate is the importance of inclusivity, of helping women and recognising their importance in trading and eradicating poverty. That is a key message that we must not forget: enabling women to trade and to support their families for a fair reward, and pursuing, as the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry) said, the overarching campaign for justice. We have heard about the importance of the co-operative movement and its role in fair trade, which we must certainly recognise; the impact that not only Traidcraft—but many other members of the Fairtrade Foundation have had on big business; and consumers’ enthusiasm to follow fair trade, with a 7% increase in Fairtrade sales last year.

I welcome the Minister’s comments in response to the specific queries from Traidcraft. While his comments are very welcome, I am sure that Traidcraft and other fair trade producers will continue to push the Government to go one step further to ensure that we really can pursue fair trade, with an emphasis on gender focus and poverty reduction. Traidcraft has had a difficult time, but it has a plan and it will survive. It is not too late, by the way, to order for Christmas: we have until the 21st, so I encourage everyone to look out their catalogues and order. I wish Traidcraft well in its new role.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered Traidcraft and the future of fair trade.
10.53 am

Grant Shapps (Welwyn Hatfield) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of Govia on the Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City railway line.

It is a pleasure to start this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I am pleased to have the opportunity to discuss an issue that, although I suspect it will not fill this second Chamber, is none the less of enormous concern to my constituents and thousands, perhaps even millions, of people along the line from Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City. I should say that, although the title of the debate is the train service from Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City, there is also an impact from other services that run along the same line, specifically and in particular the King’s Cross service toward Cambridge and through my constituency.

Unfortunately, although the problems are in no small part to do with changes that were made, rather infamously, to the timetabling in May this year, that is not the whole story. I see that I first raised my concerns about the quality of this service all the way back in December 2016, when I called for a much improved service from Govia. It is most certainly the case, however, that since the May timetable change services have gone from pretty bad to disastrously awful. I will take a few moments to highlight some of the things that have gone wrong.

It cannot be right, in a timetable change intended to add 6,000 additional carriages to the train network and the services enjoyed by everybody, that in my constituency the service provided went backwards, in terms of not just the number of trains, but the speed of those trains. In a café that I am sure is frequented by many of my constituents, I came across a poster from the 1930s about coming to live in Welwyn Garden City—the second and, I should say, the best garden city in the country—boasting that people can get from Welwyn Garden City to King’s Cross in just 23 minutes. Here we are in 2018, about to go into 2019, and we can no longer make the journey at that kind of speed. It now takes seven minutes longer to get into London from that station, Welwyn Garden City. The speed of service is certainly a problem, but the problem is not just the speed of service.

We also now have fewer trains, particularly off peak, such that some stations—for example Welham Green and Brookmans Park, stations that I use regularly—have gone from having three trains an hour off peak to only two. The service has become less frequent. In other places in my constituency, particularly Welwyn North and particularly at the weekend, that drops back to one train an hour—a completely unacceptable level of service.

The problem is not only slower trains and those missing trains, but a poorer service all round, particularly from the larger stations, Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City, which are suffering. I have been inundated—and I mean inundated—with correspondence from my constituents, who are upset and concerned. At the height of the timetabling problems in the summer, some even had to give up their jobs as a result of this appalling level of service. While I accept that the Minister—

who by the way I consider entirely blameless in all this, since he has only been in the job for a few weeks—will get to his feet and reassure me that things are improving, I must say that my patience has already given way and I have been looking for a suitable alternative.

Fortunately, there is an example of an alternative that could be put in place to resolve many of the problems. I have been in continuous discussion with Transport for London, which is keen to take over the service. I know that TfL has been in contact with the Minister’s predecessor, if not the Minister as yet, and certainly with the Secretary of State for discussion, and has written a detailed note in which it points out that if it were to run the service from Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City as a London Overground service, it could offer us better integration into the railway network, faster trains, more trains, cleaner platforms and a service integrated across the entire information system—in other words, when we are looking at information for the reliability of services, we are looking at the entire TfL system in one go.

I think that would make a significant impact on the quality and level of services to my constituency. It is of course the case that to get to my constituency, those services must run through several other stations along the line that are outside my patch, so I have been in active conversation with and writing to Members of Parliament across parties and right down the track from Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City, to seek their opinions. It is probably true to say that the concerns that have been raised in the past have been about where the Transport for London services would run outside London boroughs. That actually occurs in only two constituencies—that of my hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Oliver Dowden) and mine. The concern is effectively that TfL would be in charge of services over which our constituents would have no democratic control.

Would it be the case that TfL running that line would somehow remove from my constituents the ability to hold both the franchiser and the franchisee—the organising department, in the case of TfL—to account? Not in my view. We are more than happy to take on the small risk that, because we are not Greater London taxpayers, the Mayor’s office might attempt to totally ignore our views. We simply do not accept that that would be the case, and I bring evidence.

London Overground lines run by TfL and Arriva Rail London already go into my county of Hertfordshire and elsewhere. I have taken the time and trouble to speak to Members for and residents of those areas, and none have said that they somehow feel ignored because they happen to be just outside London. Many report a quite dramatic increase in service quality as a result of the lines switching to TfL. I have some figures that back that up.

The lines that TfL has taken over and changed to London Overground lines have seen an increased frequency of trains, from 400 per day in 2007 to 1,500 per day 10 years later. Riderhip has increased by 650%, delays have decreased by 30% and customer satisfaction has increased by 18%. In other words, I am more than convinced that switching the distinct Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City line to London Overground would increase customer satisfaction, improve the quality of our services and make our services far more integrated.

However, there is yet another reason why I believe that the Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City line should be run by London Overground—the heritage of the line...
itself. As I am sure only railway geeks will be aware, a section of the line actually operated as part of the London Underground until the 1970s. That section was from Moorgate to, I think, Drayton Park, where observers will find that the lights on the Govia Great Northern trains still flicker as they switch from the different electrics that were used on the London Underground. We already have the heritage of being a London Underground line. I argue that it is high time to convert the whole line to a London Overground line, which has only been available since the 2007 innovation.

The case is convincing indeed, but the question is how we get to that situation. I have met the deputy Mayor, the Secretary of State and the former Rail Minister; indeed, I have met every former Rail Minister from before the former Rail Minister. The Secretary of State has already said that this part of the Govia franchise needs splitting out, which, as hon. Members will imagine, I am very keen to see happen. In any case, the franchise is up for renewal in 2021.

I do not think that there is any principled objection to TfL managing that line, which I argue should be along the same basis as the other London Overground lines, with TfL procuring a service from Arriva Rail London. However, in order for that to happen, I need ministerial action almost immediately, and it is for that reason in particular that I secured the debate. As the Minister will know from his limited time in the job, these things do not happen overnight; the procurement process takes a couple of years.

Specifically, TfL now needs research and data that only Govia can provide in order to fully model this replacement service, with a deadline of February 2019. In other words, we have only a couple of months for that information to be passed across. How does that happen, in practical terms? It is straightforward: the Secretary of State needs to request that Govia shares that information.

At the risk of boring the Minister with details of woe and appalling service and the heartbreak of the problems over the summer, I put on the record my thanks to the Department for Transport for responding to my calls for additional compensation for commuters who were unable to travel during that period of enormous disruption. It was always the case, particularly for Southern, that compensation was offered if services completely fell. It was always the case, particularly for Southern, that information.

Specifically, TfL now needs research and data that only Govia can provide in order to fully model this replacement service, with a deadline of February 2019. In other words, we have only a couple of months for that information to be passed across. How does that happen, in practical terms? It is straightforward: the Secretary of State needs to request that Govia shares that information.

At the risk of boring the Minister with details of woe and appalling service and the heartbreak of the problems over the summer, I put on the record my thanks to the Department for Transport for responding to my calls for additional compensation for commuters who were unable to travel during that period of enormous disruption. It was always the case, particularly for Southern, that compensation was offered if services completely fell. It was always the case, particularly for Southern, that compensation was offered if services completely fell apart, and in this case I think a month’s free travel was offered to season ticket holders.

However, the problem for my constituents was that many travel slightly less frequently. They do not know what time of day they might travel—perhaps after dropping the kids at school—and some days they might work at home. I came to a deal, after being very insistent with the Secretary of State in a meeting very early during the disruption post May, that additional compensation should apply not only to those who had season tickets but to everybody else who used the line on a regular basis. We agreed in the end that commuters who would demonstrate that they travelled on three days or more per week should be compensated.

I have to say that there was a bit of an internal, behind-the-scenes battle involving the Treasury. A couple of times it said it could not do it, which I said was unacceptable, and I am pleased and grateful that the Minister’s Department ensured that compensation was offered. Constituents now regularly come up to me and tell me that they have had back £200 or £300 of compensation in addition to the delay repay scheme, which is far too fiddly to use and which I know the Minister has plans for.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman makes a compelling case on behalf of his constituents for looking at the management of the service. Does he agree with the Transport Committee that season ticket holders and others who were so badly affected by the timetable changes on Great Northern should receive a discount on their 2019 season tickets, in order to protect them from the fare increase due in January? That might provide some more immediate relief than the longer term changes that he seeks.

Grant Shapps: Yes, I agree. Commuters on our line from Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City have suffered unbelievable disruption. It would be right for the Minister and the Department to look at how they could compensate those commuters, which could perhaps be with a discount on the fare increase that has been mentioned for the new year.

I support that call, although I accept at the same time that, while being given £200 or £300 does not in any way compensate for the appalling disruption, it is at least a recognition of it, since it comes on top of the delay repay scheme. I put on the record that commuters should not be put off if they have already gone online and claimed their £3 back for a late train using the delay repay scheme. I am assured by Govia that they can now also claim compensation, whether they are a season ticket holder or not, using whatever means of proof they can provide. That can be a bank or credit card statement or tickets. I know some people will have bought carnets rather than tickets. Govia is prepared to be very flexible.

I will mention one other matter before I sit down. I have for a long time called for Oyster cards to be accepted along the distance of the line. I think it is currently accepted only from Moorgate to Hadley Wood, which means that ticketing is a complicated business. A person has to get an overground ticket. Then, at some point when they come off the train—at Finsbury Park or Highbury & Islington—they have to switch to paying by Oyster. The position at the moment is very unsatisfactory, so I am really delighted, on behalf of my constituents, that the Government and the Minister have announced that Oyster will come into play next year—I understand that that will be at some point in the autumn—meaning that the Oyster network will extend right out to Welwyn Garden City, along the length of that line. I would like to push it further—of course everyone will say that—because Welwyn North is also in my constituency and I must make reference to that. However, I will be very pleased to see this innovation. It will help tremendously; it will speed up ticketing and make things dramatically. The innovation of not just Oyster but contactless payment—the ability to use phones and credit cards—makes travelling a lot easier.

Therefore I really have two specific requests: one simple and one on which I hope that the Minister will actually be able to reassure me, either today or very soon—ideally before Christmas. It will be his Christmas present to my commuters and, I suspect, commuters right the way along the line if he can provide clarification.
on the first point, and a yes on the second. The clarification is on the date on which the Oyster card will actually be introduced in our area. I very much hope that the Minister has available the date of its introduction next year. If not, I just seek clarification that it will certainly be introduced next year.

If my second point is not resolved as we go into the new year, the Minister will find me, rather annoyingly, on his shoulders about it. I am talking about the provision of data from Govia to TfL so that we can start the process of matching a London Overground service to the line and not miss the 2021 deadline. I am reliably informed that that must be done by the end of February next year to meet the deadline. I invite the Minister to make my constituents’ Christmas.

11.11 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) and congratulate him on securing the debate. I recognise that he is a very long-standing campaigner on rail for his constituents; he detailed some of the things that he has achieved. I think that his constituents are incredibly well represented and I hope that they fully show their appreciation of that to him, because he has delivered improvements for them.

My right hon. Friend has focused today on the quality and quantity of the rail service and particularly how that has faltered in the course of this year. The timetable change on 20 May caused an unacceptable level of delays and cancellations on Great Northern services through the Welwyn Hatfield constituency. That was not the only constituency affected; the May timetable change was a very major fail from the industry as a whole, some really impressive things have been delivered—things that were started and taken forward, indeed, by my right hon. Friend. I am thinking of such things as, in the north, the Ordsall Chord and work at Liverpool Lime Street. The timetable change was to bring some of the new interventions and upgrades into service for passengers, but that has not happened yet, so it did not just cause disruption; it was a real missed opportunity as well. I will come on to that in a moment.

Since the interim timetable was introduced on 15 July, we have seen improved performance on the Great Northern line. In the most recent figures, the public performance measure for these services was around 83%. I completely understand that that is not good enough; we are obviously aiming for vast improvement, but it is still an improvement compared with 74%, which was the equivalent last year.

Yes, there clearly remains room for improvement, and we continue to push GTR to improve reliability across its network.

Grant Shapps: I just caution the Minister on quoting statistics, because the trouble is that it is 80-whatever per cent. of fewer trains. The timetable has left my constituents with fewer options, which means that the percentages, even if the timetable runs perfectly, are actually rather meaningless.

Andrew Jones: I will come on to that point. I would not go so far as to say that the statistics are meaningless, because they are part of the measures that we use to measure the performance of train operating companies. They are regularly scrutinised: indeed, I have found myself looking daily at the PPM by individual franchise, which is a habit I must get out of. This is monitored by the regulator and by officials in the Department. I will come on to the quantity of trains, but it does matter. We want to ensure that train operating companies and Network Rail are held to account for a failure to improve.

GTR is working on a range of ongoing schemes designed to improve the underlying performance. There are more fully trained drivers on this route than ever before, and service performance is improving as a result of revised operational plans that make best use of those additional resources. Network Rail continues to deliver improvements designed to combat some of the underlying infrastructure issues on this part of the network. GTR and Network Rail are collaborating more closely to reduce the frequency and impact of trespass, which has been a type of incident affecting this route. The rail industry is implementing new solutions to reduce that risk, including by focusing, through social media channels, on the target demographic.

One question raised repeatedly by colleagues across the House has been this: what is being done to hold the operators to account? We have seen some improvement in performance. We hang always been clear that GTR would be held to account for its role in the disruption earlier this year. It will make no profit in this financial year, and we have capped the profit that the operator...
can make for the remaining years of the franchise. It will contribute £15 million towards tangible improvements for passengers and work with local rail user groups representing the passengers most affected by the disruption in determining where the money is spent. That is in addition to the £15 million that the operator has already contributed towards compensation for passengers since the May timetable disruption. I am pleased that those steps will hold GTR to account appropriately and will directly benefit the passengers who were most affected during the disruption.

There was a timetable change last week. The December 2018 timetable change was a scaled-back one, but it was nevertheless significant because it was implemented using changed procedures, in the light of the learnings from May. Compared with the 15 July interim timetable, this new timetable, which has landed well, brings an increase in services for Welwyn Hatfield, focused mainly on the off-peak periods. Compared with before May ’18, passengers in my right hon. friend’s constituency now see an extra service in each off-peak hour from Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield to Moorgate, additional peak services between Welwyn North and King’s Cross, and additional peak services between Brookmans Park, Welham Green and Moorgate.

Grant Shapps: Briefly, I do not want the House to be misled in any way by those numbers. It is certainly true and very welcome that the additional service is being laid on. The Minister mentions Welwyn Garden and Hatfield. It would be unreasonable to expect the Minister and others to know the full layout of stations, but there are other stations along this line in my constituency. Curiously, two of the smaller stations have been removed from the daytime off-peak stops entirely, whereas nearby everywhere else along the line to Moorgate is included. That is an unacceptable position.

I have been working with some of the rail user groups, which point out that it is possible to stop those trains at those stations and—particularly using the new 717 trains with the faster speed-up and slow-down times—still meet the timetable, without preventing other trains from running along the line. I would be grateful if the Minister would check back on that with his Department, to see whether we can get those other stations included.

Andrew Jones: Of course, I will take a number of points back from this debate, as I do with any debate, and take action to help colleagues to improve their services. I undertake right away to do just that.

We now have a timetable that appears robust and has landed well. We are continuing to monitor performance on a daily basis. My right hon. friend has expressed concerns that Brookmans Park and Welham Green stations are seeing a reduction in services compared with the level of performance pre the May ’18 timetable, from three trains per hour during off peak to two trains per hour. Officials in the Department have discussed the issue with the operator. GTR has been using loading data and passenger count data to check whether that decision was correct. It found that very few passengers boarded at those stations during the day, and there was not the level of demand to justify three trains per hour.

The operator has to provide the timetable that most effectively balances the often competing demands of different passengers at different stations. In the latest station usage figures published only last week by the Office of Rail and Road, Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield both have more than 10 times as many entries and exits than Brookmans Park and Welham Green. In that context, it seems reasonable for GTR to provide a half-hourly off-peak service at Brookmans Park and Welham Green, and a service every 15 minutes at Welwyn Garden City and Hatfield.

Grant Shapps: I know the Minister has several remarks to make, but I need to challenge him on those figures. At Brookmans Park and Welham Green, passenger numbers have been increasing over a period of time. I have the numbers here, and I will leave them with the Minister. I do not accept that we should accept a worse service than pre May, when the overall purpose of the timetable is to improve the service across the network. I have now spoken to GTR, subsequent to the data that the Minister has, and suggested a system to allow trains to stop there without disrupting the rest of the timetable. If that can be done, I would appreciate the Minister taking a close interest in achieving it, as long as it does not destroy any of the rest of the network.

Andrew Jones: I have been looking through the usage data, so I will look at his data with some interest, because it is not entirely consistent with the picture that I have been considering. Perhaps we are looking at different timescales, but I would be grateful if he would give me the data, so that I can compare and contrast. As it stands, I know that GTR has been in discussion with local rail users and has made some changes. Previously, the two services were at 19 and 37 minutes past the hour. That meant that if a passenger missed the train at 37 minutes past, they had a long wait of 40 minutes for the next train. Now the services are at 19 and 49 minutes past the hour. Therefore, it is a half-hourly service.

My right hon. friend mentioned weekend services, and I recognise that they remain a significant issue. I understand that the situation will be much improved as part of the next timetable change in May. That is still being worked on, but I will ensure that my right hon. friend and colleagues along the line are kept informed of the change. In May, when there will be a bigger timetable change, more services will come online and more of the planned enhancements will become available for passengers.

Bringing Transport for London services to Welwyn Garden City was a key part of my right hon. friend’s speech, and I know that he has campaigned for services between Welwyn and Moorgate to be transferred to TFL. I am very glad that the announcement of the Oyster and contactless extension has landed well. I am afraid I cannot give him exactly the Christmas present he asked for—the date when it will land—but I can confirm that it will happen next year. At the moment, our target date is no more specific than the autumn. If it can be brought forward, I will do that, because I recognise that it is of benefit, but it has taken a significant amount of work to get to this point. Again, I will keep him posted on progress. I know that this has been a long piece of work that he has focused on, but it is coming good for his constituents. It will allow commuters and other passengers to have seamless journeys into the capital. It is an early step in the Department’s commitment to expanding the availability of pay-as-you-go ticketing.
Customers like it, it boosts usage and it makes it easier to manage peak-time flows through busy stations, so this is an important positive.

On the transfer of services to TfL, the Department is actively considering the future of the Thameslink, Southern and Great Northern franchises. We are working closely with the Williams Rail Review, which is examining the most appropriate organisational and commercial models for the future of the rail industry. This work is at an early stage, but it is fair to say that nothing is off the table. It is a very wide-ranging review. It is an important review, because although our current system of privatisation has led to a fantastic burst of investment and passenger growth across our network, and has taken us from A to B with 1 billion more passenger journeys per year, are we really set up to take the rail industry from B to the future? How do we cater for future growth, and what is the right kind of structure for achieving that? That is what Keith Williams's review is about, and nothing is off the table. It is a very big piece of work, and I will ensure that my right hon. Friend's concerns and questions are fed into it.

I must mention that we will see some new trains on this route—brand new trains will enter passenger service on the Moorgate route. The class 313s that currently operate on the Great Northern line were built in the 1970s, but passenger numbers have increased substantially in the decades since, so there is a need for new trains that can meet current capacity demands. The new trains have been designed to provide much more capacity to meet the demand on the busy suburban Moorgate line. The new trains carry 943 passengers, compared with 640 for the old trains. That is automatically a significant increase in capacity.

However, it is a question not just of capacity, but of quality—a point made by my right hon. Friend. The quality of the new trains is much higher. They come with air conditioning, plug sockets, wi-fi and real-time passenger information screens. They are also designed for the improved modern safety and accessibility standards. I believe these trains will substantially improve the quality of service on the line, while addressing the core underlying need to put more capacity into the network, to serve his constituents.

I will follow up with the Department on my right hon. Friend's point about data, and I will keep him posted. I am aware of the pressing nature of it, which he has highlighted. I thank my right hon. Friend for securing this debate.

Grant Shapps: I notice that the Minister is wrapping up a minute early, so I just want to press him on this point. I did not hear a commitment there, but I heard about a long, wide-ranging review with nothing off the table. However, as I pointed out, we need a decision on data provided by Govia to TfL by the end of February next year. Therefore, a long and wide-ranging review does not sound entirely hopeful. I would like to press him, if I may, a little bit harder on that. Is he saying that a long-winded review would miss that timetable?

Andrew Jones: The Williams review is a bigger piece of work, but I also said that I would take back the points about Govia and TfL and keep my right hon. Friend informed. That is what I was referring to, so I have not missed it. Let me just finish by saying that the performance on Great Northern after May was unacceptable. Action has been taken against GTR in respect of that, and we continue to monitor performance closely. Additional Moorgate services were introduced last week, providing additional capacity in Welwyn Hatfield. I hope that 2019 will see further improvements, including the very popular introduction of pay-as-you-go ticketing. I will follow up all the points raised by my right hon. Friend and keep him posted.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): I am pleased to say that this debate does not qualify for delay and repay, and we have arrived at our destination on time.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the performance of Govia on the Moorgate to Welwyn Garden City railway line.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
I have talked to many of the firefighters who attended Grenfell Tower, many of whom are still struggling emotionally and some of whom may choose to leave active duty altogether. I have had a full briefing from the London fire brigade and I am aware of the new focus on mental health awareness, which is fully supported by the commissioner.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Do you agree that stress, anxiety and depression are now common features in the fire service—especially the London fire service—according to organisational listings? That should not be the case.

Emma Dent Coad: I concur absolutely with my hon. Friend. The London fire brigade has appointed additional counsellors and set up Mind blue light champions, who are volunteers from within the service who can signpost colleagues to the counselling and trauma service.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She raises a pertinent point, which we should all pay attention to. She mentions the appointment of counsellors, which is absolutely crucial. The way to help someone to avoid mental health problems is for them to have somebody to talk to when they are experiencing the problems. There is no point in them just sitting there and experiencing the problems on their own; they need somebody to share them with and to help them.

Emma Dent Coad: I concur absolutely with the hon. Gentleman.

I hear that firefighters who came from fire stations near the fire are getting a higher standard of care than those from further afield. Call centre staff—many of whom spoke to people trapped by the fire, as we heard during the inquiry—are also traumatised, and some are not getting the support they need.

Let us remember that more than 300 firefighters were involved in the rescue attempt at Grenfell, and that it was not one single, terrible, catastrophic event. The fire raged for more than 12 hours, in which firefighters continually risked their lives in their attempt to save the lives of others. Some of the scenes they saw, and the choices they had to make, are with them every day.

Despite that, the psychological help that those brave men and women, including the call centre and support staff, so clearly need is very uneven. Some have received talking therapy. I have previously told the House that I have received that treatment myself, and it did not help me at all, although I accept it may help others. That treatment is available within the fire service.

Some people have been fortunate enough to receive eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing therapy, which I am told has been helpful, but it is usually available only from the Fire Fighters Charity, so capacity is limited—we are dependent on charity. Some have had very little treatment. I am told that many firefighters from stations across London who attended the fire have not had the support they need, and certainly not the emotional support from the community that many local officers have benefited from.

Three days after the fire, I dropped into one of our fire stations late at night. I drank tea and heard their stories. The team, who had fought back-to-back shifts
on Tuesday and Wednesday, had had no time off. All leave had been cancelled. They were emotionally drained and physically exhausted. All I could think was, “Where is the back-up they’d need if there was another Ladbroke Grove train crash now?”. The terrible answer is that there is none.

Cuts to frontline staff mean that, even after a disaster such as Grenfell, there may be no capacity for compassionate leave. While nearly 20% of staff have been lost since 2010, incidents have decreased by just 12%, so fewer operational firefighting staff are attending more incidents each.

Janet Daby: Even though the Government continue to state that a decrease in staffing is based on demand, do you agree that incidents have increased by 14% since 2014? We need to invest more in our fire services and our emergency services.

Emma Dent Coad: I concur absolutely with my hon. Friend; thank you.

Pay restraint and a squeeze on pensions mean that many firefighters have to work second jobs on their days off to pay their household bills. My specific experience relates to the London fire brigade, but I am aware that those issues affect fire services across the country.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I know my hon. Friend is talking about her own experiences, but when I was first elected in 1997, I visited the fire station in Stroud. Then, their appliances were always staffed by eight members, but they would go out with seven. When I talked to them recently, they were talking about going out with four on an appliance, and sometimes three. That is the result of cuts; they have an immense impact. Does she agree that they really affect the stress that firefighters are under?

Emma Dent Coad: I agree absolutely with my hon. Friend. The cuts and the shortage of staff are huge issues.

Mental health support is still often seen as an afterthought or an add-on and its provision is expected to be funded from the ever-diminishing funding that services receive. The mental health charity Mind tells us that an incredible 85% of fire and rescue personnel have experienced stress and poor mental health at work. That figure has risen by one third in the last six years. Although fire and rescue personnel are more at risk from mental health problems because of the nature of their work, they are less likely to take time off, which can affect their home life as well as their physical health.

Mind also tells us that repeated exposure to traumatic events, physical injuries, increased workload and financial pressures are affecting fire and rescue services personnel more and more. For the first time, the most common cause of absence in the London fire brigade is stress, anxiety and depression. That cannot continue. Surely, we have a duty of care to support those who risk their lives to save ours. It is not enough to expect each service across the country to tackle this growing problem individually with no additional financial support. Firefighters should be able to rely on us to protect their mental health, so they can be at their best when we need them.

We have seen how firefighters as well as call centre staff have had to relieve those hours in painful detail under relentless questioning at the inquiry; and we have heard how that has retraumatised them. We have also heard how retired firefighters watching footage of the Grenfell Tower fire on television or online have also been retraumatised, demonstrating that trauma follows people into retirement unless it is properly dealt with by qualified psychologists.

We depend on firefighters to save and protect the public from flooding, building collapse, road traffic accidents, train crashes, passengers under trains and terrorist attacks, as well as fire. I therefore ask the Minister to increase funding of the fire and rescue services that we depend on, so that support for their mental health can be delivered fairly across the country. We rely on fire and rescue personnel to save and protect us from danger. It is time for them to be able to rely on us, to ensure that they have the help and support they need.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Just before we continue, may I gently remind Members that we speak in the third person? “You” means me, and I am not a participant in this debate.

2.40 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Roger.

I thank the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for raising this very important issue. I do not have a confession, but from the outset I have to declare an interest—that would be the best phrase—as I served for 31 years with Strathclyde Fire and Rescue Service, and it was a proud journey through my working life. In retirement, I became a local councillor who sat on the fire board, so I continue to have a great fondness and a great respect for the firefighters of today, although I am—quite clearly, for those who can see me—a firefighter from yesterday. I joined in 1974 and served until 2005.

Frontline firefighters—whether they are whole-time, retained or volunteer firefighters—who respond to emergencies, and those with specialist roles within the fire service such as fire investigators, frequently encounter seriously injured or even fatally injured persons in their day-to-day work. Preservation of the scene, particularly if it is a potential crime scene, may mean that anyone who is declared medically deceased must remain in situ, with firefighters having to work in close proximity to them.

Some incidents result in multiple fatalities. I will touch on some in the west of Scotland, but there are many others that I could cite between John O’Groats and Land’s End. For example, there was the Chinook disaster on the Mull of Kintyre, in which 29 individuals died. The first responding appliances to that incident were carrying retained personnel; they were not full-time professionals, but men and women who held down everyday jobs. There was the Lockerbie air disaster, in which 270 persons lost their life. 11 of whom were in the town of Lockerbie, particularly but not exclusively in
Sherwood Crescent. Again, the first responding appliances to that disaster were carrying retained personnel, and I absolutely applaud the work that retained personnel do. There was the Rosepark care home fire in Uddingston not so very long ago, in which 14 residents died, and that was a modern facility, and there was the Stockline plastics factory explosion in Glasgow, which was attended by whole-time personnel; nine people died in that fire. That is to name but a few incidents, none of which I personally attended. However, having been part of the fire service, I have followed the stories about them with great interest.

There are also incidents that firefighters endure in which our colleagues are injured, or even fatally injured, in fires. It does not happen that often, but when it does, what a sad and dark day it is. We can even go way back to the Cheapside disaster in Glasgow in the late 1960s, in which I think 15 firefighters and four salvage personnel lost their life. That was an exceptionally horrific incident, but we have improved safety a lot since then.

Such repeated experiences without appropriate ongoing support from external counsellors or medical professionals may result in some firefighters and other emergency responders—I do not exclude other emergency responders who suffer similar pressures—succumbing to stress-related illness, leading to absence from work and, in the worst cases, to their being medically retired; indeed, as the hon. Member for Kensington said, they may even lead to firefighters taking their own life, which in itself is an absolute tragedy.

Believe me: firefighters give their all at incidents, both physically and mentally. They have to be constantly alert at an ongoing incident—alert for their own safety; for the safety of their colleagues; and for the safety of the general public. If the outcome of an incident is not what firefighters would wish for, their initial adrenalin rush turns to what I would describe as a devastating disappointment that they have not achieved their goal or what they had hoped for. Their bodies and minds must cope with sudden emotional changes.

There are also occasions when the judicial process exacerbates firefighters’ exposure to potential stressors, in that the police and, in Scotland, the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service may be reluctant for immediate debriefs of crews to take place until they have met with individuals and taken their statements, to ensure that their evidence is not compromised. It is an added stress when firefighters have to speak to people in authority about what has taken place. We have seen on our televisions the grilling of some of the officers at the Grenfell fire. Those individuals did their very best that night, yet they are being grilled through the courts service and various inquiries.

Debriefs have immense value, not simply so that crews can learn lessons in relation to how an incident went—what they could have done better, and so on—but to provide individuals with the opportunity to express their feelings to their peers. They may not wish to burden—or may not be able to burden—their family and friends with those feelings, or confidentiality might prevent them from offloading those concerns on those outside the service. All of these things may be worse for retained or volunteer firefighters, who live in the very communities that they serve; on many occasions, they may know the victims of an incident.

I will touch on two poignant road traffic crashes that illustrate that. In one incident, a firefighter said hello to four young individuals at a shopping centre in a small town. He knew the four individuals and their parents. An hour after a courteous conversation with the four individuals, his pager was activated and he responded to a road traffic crash in which two of those young individuals had died. As one would expect, he conducted himself professionally, but weeks, if not months, later that incident came back to haunt him. I am pleased to say that he received assistance from Strathclyde Fire and Rescue Service, and he made a full recovery.

There was another incident that had a good outcome. The driver of a retained appliance approached a road traffic crash and spotted his wife’s car; it was his wife who was trapped. As I say, there was a good outcome, as she made a full recovery. I attended that incident and it was quite a tense situation. I give credit again to those who serve their own community.

John Howell: What my hon. Friend is saying is very powerful. Does he believe that there is more that the fire service can do—I encourage my own local fire stations to do this—to have public exhibitions of what they do and show how they go about their work, because once the public understand that, there is a tremendous amount of additional support for the fire service and for the actions that they take? It would help if we gave firefighters a lot more encouragement to do that.

Bill Grant: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Yes, a lot is already being done to encourage people and to raise awareness. The fire service in Scotland used to have an annual event at the old Strathclyde regional station, with the slogan, “Reckless driving wrecks lives”, where we brought along fifth and sixth-year schoolchildren. All the emergency services took part. We also make home safety visits now and we are very much part of the team that tries to prevent these events before they happen, through accident and fire reduction. Also, let us not forget the introduction of a very simple thing in people’s homes, which is the smoke detector. In Scotland, we fit them free of charge for anyone who approaches us, and they are worth their weight in gold; they are very effective. A lot has been done on the preventive side. It is a failure if the fire engine goes out; we should prevent all the fires and reduce the number of accidents.

Recently, while out driving in my constituency with a staff member, I turned to them and told them that we had just passed the site of a fatal road accident. The accident had happened 30 to 35 years ago, but decades later I could still vividly envisage the two deceased persons in that vehicle. What triggered that, I really do not know. For some people, there will be no trigger; regrettably, an incident will live with them and haunt them for the rest of their lives constantly. I am able to put such an experience back in the box and reflect on it; perhaps I am very fortunate in that way.

It is so important that rescuers themselves do not become later in life the people who have to be rescued from extensive mental trauma. Let us be proactive and protect, to the best of our abilities, our firefighters from mental trauma or mental harm. The Health and Safety Executive defines stress as a state of imbalance between the demands placed upon an individual and “the adverse reaction people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed upon them.” That can apply to a lot of emergency responders, including the police, but it applies to firefighters in particular.
Most people, including most firefighters, can cope with the challenge of work demands, but when other life pressures are added accumulatively—for example, debt problems or marital problems—sometimes it just gets too much to bear and a tipping point is reached. Many workplaces offer stress management courses. In my time in the service, we introduced welfare officers as far back as the 1990s, along with external counselling. I am sure that continues today, probably in an improved way. Many workplaces also have in-house occupational health staff. The hon. Member for Kensington mentioned the fire service benevolent fund, which has been going for more than 100 years and is now called the Fire Fighters Charity. It offers invaluable support through its psychological rehabilitation service for serving and retired firefighters.

While people may be screened and tested for underlying illnesses, susceptibility to stress, as I understand it, may not be immediately apparent and the individual themselves may not know or wish to admit—that is one of the very sad things, and it was a very male-dominated service when I was in it, although I am pleased to report that there was changing for the better when I left—that their illness may be stress-related, given the previous stigma around mental health issues. To some degree that stigma remains.

When we see someone with an injury to their leg or a broken arm, we can see the physical injury, but we cannot see or feel a mental injury. Firefighters may wrongly perceive such an admission as a weakness on their part. It certainly is not. According to the mental health charity Mind, 37% of firefighters think colleagues would treat them differently in a negative way if they conceded or admitted that they had a mental health issue. The black humour and banter of my days—days gone by, fortunately; it is no longer politically correct, and that is quite right—was once a release valve and that has gone by, fortunately; it is no longer politically correct, and it is no longer something that is accepted or admitted that they had a mental health issue. The black humour and banter of my days—days gone by, fortunately; it is no longer politically correct, and that is quite right—was once a release valve and coping mechanism behind closed doors for firefighters, but they still have the camaraderie and they still work as a team. That is a form of therapy in itself, and it has immense value. When a whole-time firefighter returns to the station, they have that group. It is different for retained and volunteer firefighters. They return to their partners and wives individually, and that gives a different dimension to the situation.

According to Mind, 85% of people in the fire and rescue services—it is an inordinately high number—experience stress and poor health at work. They are twice as likely as the wider workforce to identify problems at work as the main cause for their stress. Statistics obtained by Members of the Scottish Parliament through a freedom of information request indicated that in 2016, 137 employees of the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service—firefighters, control room staff and support staff—were recorded as taking sick leave due to stress. Regrettably, those figures appear to be on the rise, as the figure for those recording stress as a reason for absence was 77 in 2015 and only 27 employees in 2014. That is despite an apparent fall in the number of fires and incidents. We are doing well on fires, but we have got road accidents, factory accidents and farming accidents—there is a whole range of special services. We need to discover what has changed since 2014. What are the root causes and contributing factors? Most importantly, we need to address them.

An article in a recent Fire Brigades Union magazine, Firefighter—I am an out-of-trade member and I still receive it—highlighted a need for ring-fencing money within NHS budgets for mental health. That is a prudent thing to request. The Prime Minister said last year:

“I want to use the power of the government as a force for good to transform the way we deal with mental health problems right across society, and at every stage of life. Tackling the injustice and reducing the stigma associated with mental health conditions is a priority for me, which is why today I set the goal of providing 1 million members of the public with basic mental health awareness and first aid.”

That goal has to be welcomed. I understand that NHS England got a top-up of £50 million over five years, which is most welcome, but I do not know whether that will be enough. I am not sure that the NHS will be properly supported. Should they stretch out their hand for help, we must grasp it and give that help. Better still, let us prevent them from needing to do that in the first place.

2.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for securing this debate, thereby giving us all an opportunity to participate in it. It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). He has vast knowledge from his life as a firefighter over the years, and we all appreciate the wealth of experience he brings to these debates.

I want to focus on where we are with mental health support for firefighters and give some examples of what we are doing in Northern Ireland. When we have debates such as this on issues that cross the whole United Kingdom, there is an opportunity to contribute to the wealth of the regions of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

During the worst of the troubles, which went on for 30 years, firefighters worked alongside soldiers, sifting through rubble and making bomb sites safe. They saw sights that they never thought they would have to deal with. Like our soldiers, the sights they have seen and the work they have done can never be rightly understood by anyone who has not done it. The hon. Gentleman has done it. Friends I speak to have done it, too. Like our soldiers, firefighters deserve the utmost respect and support. The terrible danger that they willingly face to save others is incredible. Their efforts, courage and sacrifice deserve the utmost honour to be given to them.

I take this opportunity to think of all the firefighters who have paid the ultimate price for their heroism—some have—and to remind their families that we have not forgotten their sacrifice. I have a very good friend who is a wee bit older than me who was a firefighter during the worst of the troubles. Even today in our discussions he will often tell me stories of what took place. Sometimes he tells the stories because he wants to just talk about
them. Some of those memories are from 30 or perhaps 40 years ago, but they are very real to him on the day he tells them and reminds people of what took place. Often, he will just shake his head when he is asked about his work. Sometimes he cannot talk about it, but the fact is that it is good for people to talk about things. For mental health, it is vital to have an accessible support network in place.

I read a media report recently that stated that the number of firefighters taking long-term sick leave because of mental health problems has soared by almost a third in the last six years. The hon. Gentleman referred to that. The study was carried out in the light of the Grenfell tragedy, which the hon. Member for Kensington referred to, but it is comparable to the situation UK-wide. Indeed, in 2016-17—the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock had a different figure, but this excludes the back room—97 Scottish fire staff took long-term mental health sick leave. In Northern Ireland, that figure was 111 for active firemen on the frontline.

I always remember another good friend of mine telling me a story. The hon. Members for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock and for Kensington referred to some of the horrors that firefighters see. The troubles are one part of that, but road traffic accidents are another. The ones that probably leave a lasting mental scar are those that involve children. When my friends tell me their stories, it is heart-rending how the incidents have affected them. Another friend said, “You know, Jim, so-and-so—I will not mention his name—had a total breakdown.” The other one said, “I had a total breakdown.” These things affect people in different ways, but what we are really saying is that road traffic accidents, whether it is children, women or men who are killed, can and do leave lasting effects.

There have been many traffic accidents over the years. I remember one very well, where a young boy from my neighbouring village died and another young fellow had life-changing health issues as a result, and still has them today. Whenever it involves local people, we can understand what they are thinking, and we can think about the firemen who have seen horrible things in that road traffic accident and about how it affects them.

There is a feeling within the fire brigades that more must be done to raise awareness of the fact that it is good to talk. One such action is firefighters from Northern Ireland aiming for a Christmas No. 1, after teaming up with two other local charities, Northern Ireland Chest Heart and Stroke and MindWise, on a new initiative called “Healthy Body, Healthy Mind”, to raise awareness of the importance, which we know well, of people keeping both their mental and physical health in good shape. On the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service website, Group Commander Keith Black, occupational health and wellbeing, explains:

“As Firefighters, we know the importance of maintaining physical fitness throughout our careers. What is equally important, however, is our mental fitness.”

Someone can run a mile or 10 miles, but they need to have the mental capacity as well. Keith Black continued that “through this new initiative we hope to remove some of the fear people may have about talking about their mental health, both amongst our own staff and in the wider public.”

Part of that initiative was the station-to-station cycle, the brainchild of firefighter Noel McKee, who is also a trained counsellor. Noel and three other firefighters cycled to every fire station, and together with the charity partners delivered a talk at two secondary schools each day of the 10-day cycle.

It is wonderful that people are attempting to fill the breach and to fill the gap through voluntary, charitable work to raise money and awareness. However, I believe that more should be done by this place to see dedicated support as a matter of right for the 111 long-term sick firefighters in Northern Ireland, and for the hundreds of others who are struggling to process the job that we called on them to do. I always look to the Minister for a constructive response, which I know I will get. I sincerely urge him to look at how we can step up to the mark in this House in the way that we are asking our firefighters to step up to the mark in real life.

3.3 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on securing the debate, and in particular on the way in which she dealt with this very sensitive subject. She shocked us all when she told us about the individual who has subsequently taken their own life; our thoughts go out to their family and friends.

I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) on 31 years in the fire service. He has some particular expertise that I could not possibly cope with and it gave me something further to think about. I am the chairman of the all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group, and the hon. Member for Kensington, who probably never sought such high office, is co-vice chair of the group. We are absolutely delighted that she has joined our group, and in a short time has demonstrated, by today’s debate, that she is making a real contribution.

I remember hearing the hon. Lady’s maiden speech last year, when she was a newly elected Member. Maiden speeches can be challenging for all those who have to make them, but the way she coped with the situation that she was in with her constituents was very telling.
She has done a first-class job since in raising the whole range of concerns resulting from that horrendous disaster. We all witnessed the repeated efforts of firefighters entering and re-entering the tower to undertake rescues of people trapped by the fire. We can only begin to imagine, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock said, how the firefighters must have felt when they returned home after attending those events.

It is acknowledged that firefighters have a stressful and traumatic job, and when they undertake the job they are advised that that is the way it is. However, I still think that we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for everything that they do, and we must do even more to support them than we are already. I remember three terrible incidents that firefighters attended in Basildon, when I was the Member of Parliament for that constituency.

I say gently to hon. Members, “Never take your children canvassing.” I took my eldest daughter canvassing. She was not asking anyone to vote for me, but she happened to come along—I think my wife and I had an issue; someone had to look after her. We knocked, but no one came to the door. It was in a tiny, rural part of the constituency. We knocked next door, and all of a sudden there was smoke. We went to the original door that we had knocked on, and we saw a human being alight. The fire service was absolutely fantastic. My daughter and I were in a state of shock, but they dealt with the situation and were absolutely brilliant.

There were two other incidents, both involving children. Firefighters found four children in a hut in a playground. They had lit a match and lost their lives. I remember another traumatic one, which was unbelievable. A gentleman had had some sort of breakdown. His wife had gone out and she came back to find that he had smothered their five children. It was not the police, but firefighters who attended. However tough a person is, I do not think that those experiences can be got over easily. That is why this subject is so important.

The Minister will probably correct me, but my understanding is that individual fire service authorities are responsible for ensuring that they have appropriate health and wellbeing support for their staff. The Fire Brigades Union has advocated for all fire authorities to have specific mental health policies. I do not know whether the Minister can enlarge on that and give us a report.

I am also advised that support is available to firefighters from various charities and professional bodies, including the Fire Fighters Charity and Mind. My hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock touched on the fact that research from Mind has found that 85% of people in the fire and rescue services have experienced stress and poor mental health at work. That is a truly shocking figure, which is totally unacceptable.

Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire & rescue services has committed to assessing how the fire authorities meet the wellbeing needs of their staff as part of the inspection question set for the year 2018-19. As my hon. Friend also touched on, NHS England announced on 9 October that up to £50 million would be made available over five years to provide ongoing physical and mental health services for those affected by the Grenfell fire, including long-term screening.

This is the season of good will when we all go round our constituencies and hypothetically appear as Father Christmas for one day. Last week, I visited our local fire station in Leigh-on-Sea twice—one to see the staff stage a community event at which they built the best Santa’s grotto ever, and then formally in a suit to thank them for all that they do. The best Christmas present they could have would be for my hon. Friend the Minister, as a result of this debate, to pledge that our Government will do whatever they can to ensure that our firefighters receive the best possible help for their mental health needs. They do a wonderful job on our behalf and risk everything. We have to bear in mind that they have their own lives and their own families to go back to, who know the scars that they bear.

3.11 pm

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Sir Roger, and to speak in this important and timely debate. I thank the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) and congratulate her on bringing it to Westminster Hall. She detailed the background thoroughly, set out what needs to be done and spoke poignantly about the traumatic impact of the Grenfell tragedy on her constituency and on the firefighters who attended the scene. I thank her for doing that. I am sure they are watching the debate and will note how seriously we take this issue. We are working collaboratively to take these issues forward and ensure that we get the best practice to support them.

My father-in-law was a firefighter in Edinburgh for almost 30 years, and he is extremely pleased that we are having this debate. Firefighters go out and do their job every day, and do not ask for much from us. They put their lives on the line, and never know what they are going out to each day. It is important that we recognise that they put themselves on the frontline and never know what they will come across. Their work can not only traumatis. It is incumbent on Members of Parliament to recognise the traumatic impact of their role and that of the other emergency services. We must therefore provide adequate services in a timely manner to ensure that firefighters are supported.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I apologise for arriving a little late, Sir Roger. Does the hon. Lady agree that part of the problem is that we have 11,000 fewer firefighters in the service because of cuts, and that 40,000 days have been lost due to mental health? That puts extra pressure on the firefighters who are still in the service. Perhaps it would be a good idea for the Government to issue a minimum ratio of counselling services to firefighters so they know that they can access a counsellor whenever they need one.

Dr Cameron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that important intervention. It is extremely important that firefighters and all emergency service personnel can access timely treatment when they need it. My experience from working in the NHS and my father-in-law’s experience is that shortages put additional stress and strain on those who do the job every day. Days lost due to physical or mental ill health put additional pressure on those who continue to keep the service going. Like all
emergency services, the fire service is a vocation as well as a job. People in the emergency services always do much more than we expect them to do every day of their working lives. It is therefore incumbent on us to support them to the best of our ability right across the United Kingdom.

I worked as a psychologist, including with key emergency services and at the high-security State Hospital in Scotland. I know that, right across the emergency services, people put themselves on the frontline to protect the public. We must recognise that some of the issues that they have to deal with are out of the ordinary for most people. The images that they see and their experiences can stay with them for decades—right into retirement. When they are in the workplace, they may not want or feel able to seek help, but support should be available at any time, including in retirement. These symptoms may come to the fore in the form of post-traumatic stress, and individuals may feel ready to access treatment at any time.

Mental health services are a priority for the Scottish National party Government in Scotland. The Scottish Budget this month reflected that: it included more than £1 billion of funding for mental health, and funding for 800 additional mental health workers. That is a recognition of the fact that the public have become more aware of mental health. Today, we are speaking about mental health services for a specific group of workers. I would be interested to hear from the Minister whether there are examples of best practice that we can roll out throughout the United Kingdom. I am also interested in hearing about his collaboration with the Scottish Government and the Minister for Mental Health in Scotland on emergency service workers.

Cognitive behavioural therapy and EMDR, which the hon. Member for Kensington mentioned, are treatments recommended for trauma, and other forms of counselling are helpful in tackling symptoms of anxiety and depression and other presentations that come from trauma. What kinds of specialist treatments are being made available to firefighters and other frontline emergency service personnel? We must ensure that they access the treatment that is recommended for the conditions that they present with.

I always enjoy listening to the contributions of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He said that the experiences of firefighters are similar to those of veterans; they may live with those experiences for a long time. Firefighters may work alongside soldiers and other service personnel who work together in this realm and have experiences that most of us do not have. Will the Minister comment on whether there are any peer support mechanisms that might be helpful? My husband served in the armed forces, and I am aware that veterans often find it extremely helpful to speak to others who have had similar experiences. Professionals do not always advocate such treatments, but it can be extremely helpful to speak to other people and have peer-to-peer support groups that are supported financially and resourced so that they can speak to others who have had similar experiences. I think that could be helpful.

When I was reading about the background to this debate, I found that stigma is an issue. With mental health issues in general, there is stigma attached to coming forward. We think of firefighters as being strong, working on the frontline and dealing with whatever happens—we have that stereotype. Added to that are the west of Scotland stereotypes that men should not come forward and speak about emotions and feelings. We are breaking that down, slowly but surely, but I think it is still there, so I can understand that the research is saying that 37% or so of firefighters feel unable to come forward to discuss their emotions, and the impact. We need to do more to break down the stereotypes and attitudes, and to increase mental health awareness—and actually mental health is on a continuum, with an impact on everyone. Then we will all feel able to come forward, but particularly those who are exposed, and re-exposed, to trauma.

I have been reading about the blue light programme, which I understand was funded from March 2015 until 2018. Will the Minister comment on the funding for that programme moving forward into 2019 and on whether, once again, there is any best practice implementation guidance from it that could perhaps be rolled out across the rest of the United Kingdom?

I thank the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who served for decades as a firefighter, and who brought his experience into the debate, for his service and dedication in that role—and subsequently in his role as an MP. He spoke about retained firefighters, which is important. Retained firefighters perhaps do not have the same level of training or support as other firefighters, and I should like to be assured that services—mental health support, but also other support—are available to them at the same level.

I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford, who paid a special tribute to those who have given their lives in the service. That is an extremely important point. He spoke about the tragedy of firefighters having to deal with the deaths of children, and the lasting impact on them, which we can all understand.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) chairs the important all-party parliamentary fire safety and rescue group, which is considering the issues in question, and I thank him for that work. I am sure that it will be extremely important for us to work collaboratively across the House to take matters forward, and to continue to work on improving services for all and getting the best practice that people deserve.

I thank everyone who contributed to the debate. I am keen to work with the Minister and to take part in a collaboration between the Department and the Scottish Government, to make sure that across the United Kingdom best practice is followed on service access, treatment and research.

3.22 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) on securing the debate. I am pleased that she was successful in applying for it. In view of her expertise, given that the Grenfell disaster happened in her constituency, no Member is better placed to lead the debate.

When I took the shadow fire and emergency services post, I wanted to visit as many fire services as possible to learn at first hand what firefighters’ main concerns are. I expected to hear about problems with funding, staffing, pay and pensions, but I was taken aback by the deep concern about mental health. Firefighters are on the frontline. It is their job to deal with life-threatening situations. I acknowledge that it is highly demanding.
and stressful work, but it is also invaluable for our communities. Mind, the mental health charity, has done some great work in supporting firefighters through its blue light programme. Its workplace criteria for identifying the potential for mental illness correspond to the risks that are posed to firefighters daily: the repeated exposure to traumatic events, the potential for physical injuries, workload pressures, suffering loss, and worries about money. Invoking those criteria helps to explain why the potential for mental illness in the fire service is extremely high. The distinct lack of direct central Government action and focus, when the evidence is clear, is astonishing.

I acknowledge that the responsibility for ensuring the health and safety of firefighters rests with individual fire and rescue authorities, and the Chief Fire Officers Association supports them in that work through its lead on fire and rescue occupational health matters. I am sure the Government will point to the commitment of £7 million to pay for mental health support through Mind’s blue light programme. That is positive, but in 2017 the number of fire and rescue staff taking long-term sick leave because of mental illness had risen by nearly a third over the previous six years. Mind has found that 85% of fire and rescue personnel have experienced stress and poor mental health at work, and firefighters are twice as likely to identify problems at work as the main cause of their mental health problems. However, that does not only affect the firefighters; there is a big impact on their families.

Fire services work hard to ensure that the support infrastructure is available. I have heard of brilliant examples of that happening, including in the London Fire Brigade and Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service, but the evidence shows that more has to be done to provide support to fire services. I do not doubt that the Government have acted, but any action cannot be separated from their wider attack on the service. Their ideologically-based austerity agenda has put more pressure on the workforce, but that pressure has increased over the past eight years, and if 11,854 firefighters have been cut in the same period, the number of incidents that the fire service responds to has decreased by 12.6% between 2010 and 2018. However, 11,854 firefighters have been cut in the same period, which equates to 20% of frontline staff. Therefore, on average we have fewer staff responding to more incidents, and incidents have risen every year since 2014. Workload pressures have increased over the past eight years, and if the Government want to be effective they must consider a staffing review as part of their policy to address mental health issues.

The effects of sustained cuts have put a considerable amount of pressure on the workforce, but that pressure is also changing. National discussions are being held regarding the expansion of the role of the firefighter to include emergency medical response. That may be a positive step if it is properly funded and if training is made readily available. However, I am not optimistic that central Government will ensure that that happens. I am not opposed on principle to EMR, but it must be properly funded. It will increase firefighters’ exposure to traumatic events and potential of losses of life. If they are not prepared for that change, it could be catastrophic for their mental health.

As a nurse, I saw such events at first hand. I assure Members that if someone is not prepared to deal with such incidents, the consequences for their wellbeing could be devastating. I was a cardiac nurse for 12 years and had an advanced life support qualification. I used to carry a cardiac arrest bleeper, and we used to run across the hospital to arrests. At that time — this is going back five to 10 years — the success rate was about 20% of resuscitations. That was in hospital, so we were getting there quickly. When a firefighter arrives at a cardiac arrest more time will have gone between what we used to call down time and the start of resuscitation, so the chances of success will be lower. At least we were successful a proportion of the time. By virtue of the way their work will happen in the community, the firefighters will see more fatalities; they will have to deal with that regularly, so it is an even more important factor in their mental health.

Bill Grant: I thank the hon. Lady for her good work in card services. That was in a controlled, measured environment, but the challenge for firefighters and ambulance personnel is that they operate in a quite unnatural environment, whether they are attending an accident at a farm or factory, or a car accident. They are exposed to the weather and elements, and there are other road users, and so on. That is an added dimension; it is not a controlled environment, although we would do our best to control it on arrival.

Karen Lee: Absolutely. I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. After someone has attended an arrest situation unsuccessfully, they go through an algorithm and they know they have done everything properly, but they still feel bad about losing that person. My point is that going to more arrests with a lower likelihood of success — because of all the things that the hon. Gentleman mentioned — involves much greater pressure. When I was a nurse we had occupational health, and there has to be something like that for firefighters — proper support.

I have been told numerous times during visits that firefighters have less time to train because of their workload. That is another thing that is very important. People going to an arrest must feel they know what they are doing. I am very concerned at the possibility that if outstanding issues are not fully addressed and firefighters are not effectively prepared for a sustained change in their role and responsibilities, their wellbeing could be damaged.

Our firefighters are heroes, and their pay must be properly addressed. As I have said time and again, they cannot spend a pat on the back. Mind has identified money worries as a contributing factor to mental illness, and considering the sacrifices made by our firefighters, the last worry they should have should be about their pay packet at the end of the month — my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington made a good point about some firefighters needing a second job, which is utterly disgraceful.

The Grenfell disaster and its consequences for our firefighters are terrible. The work that the Fire Brigades Union and the London Fire Brigade are doing to support firefighters is outstanding, and includes support for the 80 fire officers giving oral statements at the Grenfell inquiry. As the “Journey of Recovery” report highlighted, alongside all those affected, firefighters who were at the scene may be at risk of PTSD. The
consequences are clear: stress and depression have been identified as the main source of LFB sick leave post Grenfell. I commend the Government’s commitment of £50 million to tackle mental health post Grenfell, but what proportion of that money will specifically be invested in support for LFB firefighters? Eighteen months after Grenfell, those firefighters still line the route every month for the silent vigil, and they are to be commended.

I do not accuse the Government of not caring, but I believe that more could be done, and they must recognise that cuts to central Government funding and staffing levels have a subsequent effect on a workforce. Let us not get into the old argument about allocated and unallocated resources, or who is responsible for austerity—the fire service must be properly resourced. I recognise that the Minister has asked Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to assess how well services understand and meet the wellbeing needs of their workforce, and how that can be improved. Will he provide an update on that and say when we can expect additional investment or support? How much of the £7 million committed to Mind’s blue light programme is included in existing fire service resources, and how much is new money? I look forward to hearing his response.

3.31 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and may I say to the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) how sorry I am to hear about the recent death of her constituent?

I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing an extremely important debate. As she made clear—this was corroborated by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess)—her long-standing interest in the fire service predates her arrival in this place, although it has continued here, and I know from our conversations that she has a genuine interest in issues of mental health. This debate has highlighted an important and growing issue, which, as she rightly said, is not restricted to firefighters. All our emergency services face similar challenges as a result of increasing pressure on wellbeing, and there is a greater recognition across those services about the need for the Government to step up and fulfil, in the words of the hon. Lady, their duty of care. She is right: we do have a duty of care, which I will now speak about.

I also pay tribute to the firefighter of yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant). He entered the fire service on the same day that my dad entered Parliament, and his contribution was extraordinarily valuable. Many contributors to this debate spoke not from notes but from personal experience, whether as a nurse or someone with a father-in-law in the service. This was a particularly good debate, despite the terrible experiences behind it, and my hon. Friend’s contribution was extraordinarily valuable since he provided insights into the stuff on body and mind that comes from seeing and hearing things that no one wants to see or hear. He also mentioned the surges and changes in emotional state that firefighters have to cope with, and he made the point—as did others—that the trauma remains and comes back.

Anyone listening to the testimony from firefighters at the Grenfell public inquiry will have heard not just about those who performed so admirably under the most unbelievable conditions when going up and down those stairs, but about those who sat in the call room taking terrible calls under unimaginably difficult circumstances. Anyone who has spoken to some of those firefighters will know that that experience will stay with them for the rest of their lives. Some of them will need support, and some will need to be told they need support—many Members mentioned the continued stigma that is attached to our emergency services, where the tradition can still be one of taking pride in coping and being fine, with the best therapy being more work. I think we recognise as a society, and certainly as a Government, that our heroic emergency service workers need more practical support that is relevant to their state.

The hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow (Dr Cameron) made an important point about the need not only to make services available, but to make available services that are right for each individual, and I am sure the hon. Member for Kensington will agree. Certainly, in my work with Grenfell victims, I have been disappointed at times to discover cases of individuals receiving treatment that is not right for them in that situation. That point was well made, as was the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock about the landscape and nature of the workforce in the fire service, which is changing slowly and becoming increasingly diverse, and we must think hard about those changing needs.

My hon. Friend, and others, welcomed the Prime Minister’s statement of ambition and resource regarding more money for local mental health issues, which I think has cross-party support. I observe from my time in this place since 2005 that one of the great sea changes in this House has been a growing acceptance of the need for mental health to have parity with physical health, and decisive steps have been taken on that journey. Those steps have not gone as far as many of us would like, but they are decisive none the less. Again, that is part of a greater national societal awareness about the importance of mental health and the growing risk, and the demand for mental health support, not least for our emergency service workers.

Let me try to provide reassurance that the Government recognise the importance of this issue and stand ready to support and challenge the leadership in the fire service regarding the exercise of its duty of care. First, I confirm the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West, because there is now a requirement in the recently revised fire and rescue national framework for England, which sets out the Government’s expectations for a fire and rescue authority. It contains a new section on what should be considered part of the workforce strategy, and it states explicitly that each fire authority should have in place a people’s strategy that includes information on the availability of wellbeing and support services. I understand that most fire and rescue authorities, including the LFB, have workforce strategies in place, which is a good step forward.

My second observation is that although our fire service is widely recognised around the world as being among the best, we have an insufficient understanding of what good looks like. The creation of the Fire Standards Board, and the intention to create a more comprehensive and coherent set of professional standards—including in the area under discussion—is an important development.
As the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow said, we need to know what good looks like in this context.

The third element is extremely important. Indeed, arguably the most important reform that we are introducing in our desire to seek continuous improvement in the performance of our fire service is independent inspection. That is similar to what we have introduced and strengthened for the police service, and with independent inspection and an increasingly clear framework of agreed standards, we will get a better picture of what is going on out there, and we will be able to compare and contrast the performance of fire services. With independent inspection comes greater transparency and greater accountability to the inspectorate, to the local fire authority, to the police and crime commissioner—where appropriate—to the Home Office and to Parliament. In our experience with the police, that framework of transparency and accountability is what really drives change. That is exactly the framework that we are setting up.

Various contributors to the debate talked about Mind’s blue light programme, and they were right to do so. I pay tribute to those who are working to deliver it. Since 2014 we have provided £7 million to pay for mental health support through the blue light programme, which was topped up after Grenfell. It provides advice through a network on mental wellbeing, stress and anxiety, seeking help for a mental health problem, supporting a colleague with a mental health problem, post-traumatic stress disorder and supporting someone as a friend or family member.

In addition—to speak to the point on the need for proper information about what works—every fire and rescue service in England now has access to a toolkit or framework called Oscar Kilo, which is also available to the police. It provides support and guidance for those who are responsible for wellbeing in each service, to assist them in developing and building robust, efficient and effective wellbeing support. As well as a framework of accountability and transparency, there is one of specific tailored support through the blue light programme and the Oscar Kilo toolkit. Those who are responsible for wellbeing and the local strategies have access to good information about what works, and that will grow.

Another entirely valid point was made about the need to ensure that the fire service has adequate resources to do its job. If we have insufficient capacity, or that capacity is too stretched, that will have an impact on wellbeing and people’s sense of confidence and professionalism in the job that they do.

I therefore confirm that fire and rescue authorities overall will receive around £2.3 billion in 2019-20. Single-purpose fire and rescue authorities will see an increase in core spending power of 2.3%, in cash terms, and an overall increase of 0.3% since 2015-16. Bearing in mind that the debate is sponsored by the hon. Member for Kensington, in the Greater London Authority core spending power increased by 6.3% in 2019-20 compared with 2018-19, with an overall increase of 11% between 2015-16 and 2019-20. Reserves stood at £57.8 million in March 2018.

Although we have a healthy disagreement with the Labour Front-Bench team, we maintain that our fire services are adequately resourced for the demand that is placed on them. However, I have always made it very clear, and I continue to do so today, that as we move towards the next stage of fire funding—the comprehensive spending review—next year—we are updating our understanding of demand, because the past is not necessarily a guide to the future. We will approach the Treasury with our bid for police and fire funding on an informed basis, to be absolutely sure that over the next three or five years—whatever the time of the CSR—our fire services have the resources they need to do the incredibly difficult job that they do, which includes ensuring provision for adequate support of wellbeing and the welfare of the most important assets in the system, which are our people.

On that note, I will close. I put on record the Government’s thanks to our firefighters for their work. At this time of year, when most of us are out there eating, drinking and making merry, our emergency services are working extremely hard to keep us safe. Our firefighters and police are the ones who run towards danger when most of us run away from it. As we have seen at Grenfell, at the terrible fire recently in Nottingham and on motorways up and down the country, they are often called to events that are absolutely terrible—in particular when they involve children—and will probably stay with them for all their lives. It is right that we as a Government are challenged to answer for what we are doing about our duty of care, but it is also right for us to take the opportunity to place on record our thanks.
I will buy the firefighters’ record, but the idea that they have to fundraise for the charity that they will then rely on—they have to support it—is gutting, actually. I feel very strongly that we should aim for a world without charity, and where we do not need charity. In the interim, however, charity should be backing up the statutory services and certainly not replacing them. We are in a very bad state when we have to rely on charities to do things that Government should provide.

To summarise, existing services are clearly inadequate. We hear that from community members and firefighters. Today, we have heard lots of comments to back that up. We must indeed honour the brave men and women who keep us safe, but we cannot do that with words of praise alone; we have to act to take better care of them. Will the Minister please review and increase the funding, or work towards ways of doing so, rather than only setting standards and targets that are unobtainable under the existing funding regime? We need to tackle the issues that have been laid out today, and I hope he will reflect on that.

**Question put and agreed to.**

*Resolved.*

That this House has considered mental health support for firefighters.

3.48 pm

Sitting suspended.
Harrow Council is one of the lowest funded councils in London. In 2015-16, its revenue spending power per head was £159, 17% lower than the London average, ranking it 26th out of the 32 London boroughs. A similar comparison with the England average shows Harrow’s revenue spending power per head was £127, 14% below the average, ranking it 105th out of 120 local authorities. Quite how the Prime Minister can claim that austerity is over is beyond me. In Harrow, as nationally, it feels unrelenting—frankly, it is getting worse.

In July, Harrow began the full transition to universal credit. More than 17,000 residents are expected to be on it by the time the transition is completed. Our housing market is under intense pressure—for many, rents are very difficult to afford—and in some parts of the borough 40% of children live in poverty. As in other parts of the country, demand for adult social care outstrips savings, as councils are asked to provide ever more with ever-diminishing resources.

Other public services in the borough with a significant interface with the council are also under severe pressure. Harrow is having to cope with a significant increase in violent crime at a time when police numbers are set to decrease further and funding for youth services has been cut by more than 75% in cash terms since 2010. The clinical commissioning group faces a deficit of approximately £50 million and has already cut popular healthcare services such as the Alexandra Avenue walk-in service in my constituency. With the highest proportion of over-85s in London, the absence of a local NHS service that might absorb with less fight some of the financial pressures arising from having proportionately more vulnerable older adults exacerbates the pressure on the council.

Schools, too, face ever-increasing financial pressures, making it harder for them to accommodate as many requests to help children with special needs as they might want to. As I mentioned, Harrow is having to cope with a significant increase in violent crime. We have already lost just short of 200 police officers, and the fear is that we will have to lose even more.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, for giving way. He is painting a bleak picture of the funding position. May I put two points to him? First, if the council were more business friendly and encouraged businesses to invest in Harrow, more business rates would come in. Business rates income in Harrow has been declining for many years, and it is forecast to reduce further.

Secondly, I believe I am correct in saying that at the moment the budget is balanced for next year, but the forecasts for future years are very challenging indeed. Has the hon. Gentleman seen any documentation from Harrow Council that sets out that dire picture? That may lead to a lobbying strategy in which he and I go to see Ministers together, with the aim of securing more money not just for the council but for specific issues such as those he describes—it may lead to our supporting each other to get more money for the services that all our residents depend on.

Gareth Thomas: I say gently to my neighbour that I will come on to Harrow’s excellent reputation among businesses and the recognition it has received for its performance in that area. The figures I quote are figures that I sought from the council—I am sure it would be willing to provide him with them were he to approach it. There is one specific issue on which the Minister would be able to assist if he wanted to, and I intend to come to that in due course.

Harrow has always been a prudent borough. Despite its challenges, the council has not overspent for 11 years. Its leadership and supporting councillors have been determined to shield frontline services from the axe as far as they can, but the cuts are now so deep that the council is unable to balance the books without reducing those vital services to the bare bones. Local residents are understandably concerned about the impact of funding cuts on the council’s ability to keep the streets clean and to help to deal with antisocial behaviour, among other things. By continuing to make cuts of such scale, the Government are leaving councils such as Harrow in an impossible situation and leaving our most vulnerable people at risk.

To be fair, the council has already made large efficiency savings and taken great strides to increase revenue. It has led the way in digitalising many services—87% of customer transactions are carried out online, leaving extra resources to look at the most complex and difficult cases. Council tax has been increased year on year—sadly, it is now the third highest in London, but the collection rate is above 97%. The council has commercialised services and looked at innovative ways to supply residents with additional quality services that generate new income while not endangering existing businesses and the private sector. From offering services such as training, a cookery school and gardening services to MOT testing and dealing with food and trade waste, the council has been very innovative. It has also marketed itself successfully for major film locations and for commercial events in our parks. It is a leader in shared services and is working with a number of councils to make significant efficiencies for frontline and back office services together.

As I indicated, Harrow is blessed with very dedicated and hardworking staff; in 2017, its children’s services attained a “good” rating from Ofsted, putting Harrow in the top 25% of councils across the country for performance in that fundamental service—a remarkable achievement in the circumstances. However, the council cannot be expected to deliver first-rate services with a third-rate budget level of funding, and local people know that.

Cuts are already having a big impact. Harrow has closed four libraries and significantly scaled back its work in public health. Drug, alcohol and smoking cessation services have been reduced, and all discretionary grants to the charity sector have been ended. The council has also been forced to reduce taxi card provision for the disabled to the lowest level in London. There has been a significant reduction in the number of children and families that the borough’s children’s centres are able to support. Lack of funding is holding back any ability the council might have to respond appropriately to other identified local needs, such as meeting the needs of young people.

The Young Harrow Foundation, in partnership with the council, conducted a survey of school-aged children between 10 and 19, which received an astonishing 4,500 responses. The results are very worrying. Mental health and violent crime were serious concerns for
Harrow's young people; 10% said they have suicidal thoughts and 15% said they need support relating to self-harm. We all know that lives are blighted when vulnerable young people cannot access the help they need, and when people are unable to achieve their potential, everyone loses out.

In response to some of the acute issues facing councils, the Government have offered occasional one-off payments to, at best, paper over the cracks. For important services, that means councils are unsure of whether they will have the funding for key provision, and residents do not know whether vital services will continue to exist, from one year to the next. In short, it leaves local authorities unable to make long-term spending commitments to deliver some of the preventative work that would really benefit residents.

Harrow has had success in bidding for some such external funding to tackle some of those challenges. It secured £500,000-worth of investment from the Home Office to help fund early intervention services for young people at risk of joining gangs and becoming involved in youth violence. It also secured £760,000 to help support economic growth locally and was recently granted some £32 million by City Hall to build just over 600 new council homes. While this type of funding is of course welcome, these too are one-off payments for specific activities, offering no guarantees of continued funding, and the council may find itself having to cancel successful programmes if funding is not renewed. I gently suggest that that is not a grown-up, sensible way of funding programmes if funding is not renewed. I gently suggest that the funding for key provision, and residents do not know whether vital services will continue to exist, from one year to the next. In short, it leaves local authorities unable to make long-term spending commitments to deliver some of the preventative work that would really benefit residents.

Bob Blackman: The hon. Gentleman points out, rightly, that the budget in Harrow is balanced this year by one-off payments, I believe, as opposed to long-term arrangements. That is one of the things leading to future problems. Can he also answer this? Harrow is one of the very small minority of councils across the whole of England that failed to sign up for the multi-year settlement, which, although it is not always easy, gives certainty about funding over a number of years. Where councils have done that, they have known and been able to forecast what their income level will be. Harrow refused to do so, and has never answered my question why it refused. That brings the uncertainty of not knowing how much money will come in each year.

Gareth Thomas: With all due respect to the hon. Gentleman, he will recognise that even councils that have signed up to the arrangement with the Government that he describes have still faced significant additional pressures from all sorts of sources, be it social care or homelessness, as I have already outlined, exacerbating the difficulties in setting sensible long-term budgets that meet needs. It would certainly be extremely welcome to hear him putting pressure on his ministerial colleagues to allocate additional funding for the London Borough of Harrow.

Despite the difficulties I have set out, the council has continued to play its part in trying to foster economic growth, supporting the regional and sub-regional objectives for business, employment and skills set out by the West London Economic Prosperity Board. The investment pot of £1.1 million from business rates retention is going into supporting businesses in accessing online services. Furthermore, Harrow Council is supporting that by investing £480,000 to try to help to develop the skills of low-paid, low-skilled and self-employed residents in the borough. Indeed, the council has been recognised for its work in this area, winning the Best Small Business Friendly Borough award. The council is also building new housing, making use of the new homes bonus, and has set out a major regeneration programme to maximise use of council-owned sites to support sustainable housing growth, as a result of which it will get some additional income from council tax.

I recognise that Harrow Council is not alone in facing challenges of the scale that I have set out. Surrey, Torbay, Lancashire and many other councils are already in serious financial problems. Commissioners were called in to Northamptonshire council after it ran out of money. Other councils are privately warning of similar difficulties soon. Many councils are having to prop up their budgets with funding from reserves, something that Harrow has not been able to do. I gently ask how many more signs the Government need before they wake up to the crisis in local government.

One area where the Minister could help immediately is financial assistance to help the council to cover the cost of subsidence arising from the sinkhole discovered under Pinner Wood School, which has cost the council some £5.2 million and has obviously exacerbated its already very difficult financial position. We urgently need fairer funding for local government. It is not good enough for the Government to preside over the managed decline of local services. I know that in Harrow and elsewhere councils are doing some great work, but on a shoestring, and the time has come for the Government to reverse the cuts and give councils, particularly my council, Harrow, the proper levels of investment they need.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) on securing this debate. His pride in his home is evident to all, and I pay tribute to that. It is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) here; he is also a champion of his constituency, particularly when it comes to matters of local government. We are grateful for and appreciate his particular experience and insights in our debates.

I welcome the opportunity to respond to the important points that the hon. Member for Harrow West raised. In doing so, I thought it would be helpful to use a framework that I like to use—my vision of the role of local government, which consists of three main areas. The first is to drive economic growth, the second to help the most vulnerable in our society and the third to build strong communities. If hon. Members will allow me, I would like to take those areas in turn, specifically in relation to Harrow, and address the points raised.

The draft local government finance settlement, which was published last week, confirms that core spending power across the nation is forecast to increase from £45 billion this year to £46.4 billion next year, representing a cash increase of 2.8% and a real-terms increase in resources available to local authorities. In the next
financial year, Harrow Council’s core spending power will rise to £180 million, representing a 3.7% cash increase, which is substantially above the average for England and, indeed, other London local authorities. Core spending power is the standard measure of a local council’s financial resources, and it includes money from central Government grant, council tax, business rates baseline and further specific grants for adult social care and the new homes bonus.

Beyond grants, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East said, driving economic growth is the only way to ensure the vibrancy of our local communities and to raise the vital funds we need to sustain our public services. Business rates retention is one such opportunity. Under the current business rates retention system, local authorities estimate that they will retain around £2.5 billion in business rates growth this year, which is a significant revenue stream on top of the core settlement funding.

This year, all London boroughs, the Greater London Authority and the City of London are jointly piloting 100% business rates retention. Based on their forecasts, the London pilot pool would retain an additional £348 million compared with the current system. This vital incremental income supports a number of strategic investment projects in London, including investment in high-speed broadband in Harrow and other west London boroughs.

As we confirmed in the provisional settlement, all London authorities, including Harrow, will continue to pilot increased business rates retention at the level of 75% in forthcoming year. I am confident that, when it comes to supporting growth and financial sustainability, Harrow is getting what it needs.

Beyond growth, one of the most undeniably crucial roles that local government continues to play is in helping the most vulnerable in society. It is local authorities that support the elderly, the disabled and our children in need. I am in no doubt about how challenging it has been for councils to drive efficiencies, particularly in the face of growing pressures on social care, as they contribute to rebuilding our economy and tackling the deficit we inherited from the last Labour Government.

I pay tribute to the work of councillors up and down the country, which is why I was delighted that the Budget committed another £1 billion of extra funding for local services, with a strong focus on supporting some of our most vulnerable groups, including £650 million for adult and children’s social care in the next financial year. Of that, £240 million will go towards easing winter pressures, with the flexibility, as requested by councils, to use the remaining £410 million for either adult or children’s services and, where necessary, to relieve demands on the NHS. I am pleased to confirm that, as a result of these payments, Harrow Council will receive an additional £2.63 million in the next financial year. That is on top of the £240 million announced in October to address winter pressures this year, of which Harrow Council received a further £1 million.

I am pleased to say that the focus on this area and the better joined-up collaboration between the NHS and local authorities, through the Government’s better care fund, is paying dividends. Social care across the country has freed up 949 beds a day since the February 2017 peak—a 39% reduction in social care-related delayed transfers of care. I am also pleased that Harrow performed well, achieving a 58% reduction in social care-related delayed transfers of care since August last year, and now has delayed transfers of care levels significantly below the England average.

The Government’s troubled families programme is also making amazing strides in supporting our society’s most vulnerable families. I am proud to say that £920 million has been committed to the programme during this spending period. As of September this year, nearly 130,000 families have achieved significant and sustained progress against the problems identified when they first entered the programme. Some 1,400 families have been working with the programme in Harrow alone during this period, and the council is forecast to have benefited from more than £3 million over the course of the scheme.

We all see that local authorities’ vital work in building strong communities that thrive is beneficial not only to them, but to wider society. Strong communities are cohesive, and it was with that in mind that the Government announced a £100 million fund to help to ease pressures on local services resulting from recent migration. The fund has so far committed a total of £832,000 to Harrow to contribute to better public services and a more cohesive society.

Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the Minister for acknowledging some of the council’s very good work on social care and working with troubled families. Will he acknowledge that managing the sinkhole underneath Pinner Wood School—a significant and important primary school that had to be moved—is costing the council considerable sums of money? Will he be willing to meet me and a deputation from the council to discuss whether the Government could provide any further funding to help the council manage some of those costs?

Rishi Sunak: With all the will in the world, there is little I can do to help on that particular matter. As the local government Minister, I have no authority or control over the schools budget. The issue he raises relates specifically to a school.

I know that council officials have been in conversation with officials from the Department for Education, but I am obviously not privy to those conversations. I am of course happy to meet him and his deputation, but I think he may be better directing that conversation toward the Department for Education. I know that close to £10 million has been invested in maintained and voluntary-aided schools in Harrow over the last few years, and that the Department for Education is refurbishing or rebuilding about 10 different schools in Harrow through the priority schools rebuilding programme, although not the particular school that he mentions.

Beyond schools, £434,000 has been committed to support Harrow in caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, further helping to strengthen community cohesion. However, strong communities need to be connected. The roads that our constituents travel on daily form a key part of their lives, which is why at the Budget the Chancellor announced that an extra £420 million will be made available for local authorities such as Harrow to fix potholes and carry out other road repairs, ensuring safer and better roads across our communities.
Strong communities also need well-built, affordable homes, which is why, through the Budget, the Government are supporting local authorities such as Harrow to get much-needed homes built, including through the widely welcomed lifting of the housing revenue account borrowing cap. I am pleased that we were able to maintain the new homes bonus baseline for the forthcoming year. Harrow will receive more than £4 million in new homes bonus funding in the forthcoming financial year. I am also pleased that Harrow is in conversations with the Department to receive a housing infrastructure fund grant worth almost £10 million to help with the delivery of more than 600 homes at the Grange Farm site.

Strong communities also need vibrant high streets to bring us together and ensure our towns have a beating heart. The Budget provided a boost for our high streets and a new future high streets fund. I strongly urge the local authority, in conjunction with its MPs, to bid for that fund and see what it can do to drive growth along the high streets in its community.

The hon. Member for Harrow West was right to highlight the funding formula. The current funding formula needs to be updated and replaced with a robust, straightforward approach that involves a strong link between local circumstances and the way that we allocate resources. The latest round of that consultation was issued alongside the provisional settlement last week. I know that Harrow Council has contributed to our consultations in the past, and I will be delighted to hear from it again on the particular pressures that it feels it suffers from and that should be captured within a new formula. I am sure that it will be happy to see that some things it talked about in its previous submission are covered, such as the rapidly changing population dynamics that councils such as Harrow experience on the ground. Those are absolutely things that the new formula should accurately capture, to make sure that it is sustainable not only for this year but for years into the future.

I thank the hon. Member for Harrow West for calling the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East for contributing. It is my privilege to have this job and to champion local government here in Westminster. Whether it is driving economic growth, caring for the most vulnerable in our society or building those strong, cohesive communities that we cherish, local authorities in London and across the country do an amazing job.

Bob Blackman: I gently remind my hon. Friend that Harrow suffers a particular problem of businesses moving out of the area, and it therefore has a declining income from business rates. What will the Government do to help local authorities such as Harrow that suffer this problem?

Rishi Sunak: The business rates retention pilots and the extra incentive to retain more business rates, combined with the infrastructure investment that comes through the housing infrastructure fund and the growth funds, give councils the exact powers they need to drive growth and then rewards them with the retained business rates. I will be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to talk through any other ideas that he has. The high street fund will be an excellent place to start.

I am grateful for the dedication of hon. Members and councils. I will continue to ensure that their voices are heard in this place and that they get the support that they need.

Question put and agreed to.
HBOS Reading: Independent Review

4.30 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the independent review of HBOS Reading.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. There are some fundamental business principles that underpin any free market economy: we compete on a fair and level playing field; we all have a fair, fighting chance of success; we all play by the same rules; and our regulations and the rule of law ensure, where injustices occur, that justice is done and is seen to be done.

Many people in the Public Gallery today no longer believe in those principles. They have been subject to scandalous, criminal fraud perpetrated by senior bank managers at Lloyds and HBOS. They have had to suffer further scandal at the hands of those at the highest level in the bank who, when made aware of the fraud, instead of holding their hands up to what had gone wrong, denied any wrongdoing for 10 years. Indeed, there is clear and compelling evidence that the most senior management sought to cover up the fraud, suppressed evidence, and used the HBOS review process, which is supposedly there to compensate the victims, to minimise payments and perpetuate the cover-up. Incredibly, our system—our regulators—stood by and allowed the fraud against the victims to continue.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman knows my view of him. He does an enormous amount of work on these issues, and I pay tribute to him for all that work. He will be aware of my constituent, Mr Alun Richards, whose business went under through the Lloyds Banking Group. He has mentioned public bodies, including the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, the Solicitors Regulation Authority and the Serious Fraud Office, turning a blind eye. He and I have been working for a number of years to try to get those organisations to deal with these complaints. Millions and millions of pounds have gone missing. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is a need for a fundamental review, led by the Treasury, of how we can get a better banking system that works for customers and is a lot more ethical about how it conducts its business practices?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do agree. The sector is so far away from the banking sector that we need that fundamental reform is needed not only in the regulatory process, but in the mechanisms that enable victims to hold the banks to account, which I will come on to soon.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. One of my constituents, Michael Field, has been a victim of the banks as well. He borrowed from Lloyds to finance the building of several houses. He maintained his payments and fulfilled the terms and conditions of the loan agreement, yet Lloyds seized his assets and foreclosed on him. He then discovered that his assets had been sold on to another organisation within the bank. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government need to have parallel and very specific inquiries about the operation of Lloyds in relation to these and similar matters?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman makes his case very well. The difficulty goes back to my point about justice being seen to be done. There is no mechanism currently. I cannot judge the guilt or innocence in the business relationship between his constituent and his bank. The key is to allow mechanisms for these people to take their complaints forward, without having to be subject to the one-sided, partial process that they are subject to today. That is what the Griggs review is.

I will now make a little progress, if I may.

Alex Cunningham rose—

Kevin Hollinrake: I will give way briefly.

Alex Cunningham: I just want to make the point that my constituent fulfilled all the terms and conditions and maintained his payments, yet he has no recourse. I take the point about being able to make a complaint, but what happened should never have been allowed to happen.

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree, and there are many cases like that. I will talk about the redress processes shortly. There are three elements to what we are discussing: the fraud itself; the potential cover-up of the fraud; and the review that supposedly provides justice for the victims of the fraud. There were finally convictions for the fraud in January 2017. Six people, including three former HBOS employees, were convicted of defrauding business customers over 10 years earlier. More than £250 million in total was defrauded, and the people who were guilty of the crimes got 47 years in jail.

Many people lost millions of pounds—in some cases, it was tens of millions—but these issues did not come to light because of the regulators. They came to light because of individuals who were so persistent and determined; I am thinking particularly of Paul and Nikki Turner, journalists such as Ian Fraser, and Sally Masterton, who worked for Lloyds. Had it not been for them, the issues would never have come to light. Of course, their efforts have taken a great toll on them and come at great cost to them.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I am sorry to interrupt the flow of the hon. Gentleman's speech. He has referred to the people who are in jail at the moment. One of my constituents was working for a company called Carringworth. Through its dealings with those people who are in jail now, her company was forced into administration. Now, after 10 years of hell, the administrators are putting huge pressure on her to settle. Is it not wrong that she should be forced to settle before the establishment of an independent set of organisations that can adjudicate and ensure that she gets the justice that she deserves?

Kevin Hollinrake: Yes. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and he touches on the human cost of these issues as well as the financial cost, which is critical. What we want to see, which I will come on to, is an opening up of all the cases that have been through the Griggs review by means of examination through a completely impartial arbitration process that will fairly adjudicate and arbitrate the claims.
As if the fraud were not bad enough, there was a cover-up. HBOS and Lloyds became aware of the issue from 2006 onwards. The current chief executive, António Horta-Osório, was made aware of the fraud as soon as he took up his post in 2011 by the Turners and many others. Famously, in September 2013, Sally Masterton, a senior risk officer at Lloyds Banking Group, on the instructions of her line manager, produced a report called the Project Lord Turnbull report. Its findings were shocking. There was a corporate strategy within Lloyds and HBOS to conceal the fraud, which caused substantial loss to shareholders and investors.

At that point, there was another opportunity for the bank to hold its hands up and say, “Right, enough is enough.” Let’s get all of this out in the open and get to the bottom of what really happened. Does he agree? Did that happen? No, that is not what happened. Sally Masterton was suspended from her job and discredited to the Financial Conduct Authority. Scandalously, she was prevented from working with the police, despite being told that she was vital to the investigation, and then she was fired. The senior management did not make the report available to non-executive directors or the chair of the board for three years. Finally, last month, the bank reversed its position and confirmed that Sally had “acted with integrity and in good faith at all times”.

There were other elements of cover-up. Thames Valley police said that Lloyds had led them a “merry dance” in their £7-million investigation of these issues. There is evidence of a wider fraud, certainly from victims going through the Griggs review to whom I have spoken. They talk about other senior managers, including Paul Burnett, high risk managing director at HBOS Edinburgh, personally having involvement with HBOS Reading. HBOS compliance officers were embedded in the fraudsters’ operations, and of course gagging orders are used across the board to prevent more disclosures from coming to light.

Let me move on to the review. It was supposed to be an independent review and was headed by Professor Griggs—that is why we call it the Griggs review. It was supposed to provide swift and fair compensation to the victims. However, the SME Alliance, which has done so much work for so many of the victims, instructed Jonathan Laidlaw, QC, who names among his clients the Bank of England, to review the review itself. He determined, in a short report, that the review is “procedurally defective”, and its principles are “flawed and appear partial” to the bank’s interests. That description is consistent with the experiences and stories of the victims. They have described the review to us as corrupt, disgraceful, one-sided and evincing an absence of due diligence, with manipulated documents and lies about evidence. Agreed payments are not met, and the process makes life as difficult and unpleasant as possible. These are victims of fraud.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman add one more element, namely deliberate over-complication? It seems that this whole saga has been made so opaque that it is difficult to get to the bottom of what really happened. Does he agree?

Kevin Hollinrake: I totally agree with that. I will come on to the disclosure of evidence shortly, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the bank could have dealt with this summarily many years ago, as soon as it came to light, but it chose not to. Why it chose not to is an open question.

The basic assumption of this review was laid out by Professor Griggs himself, who was quoted as saying that when he deals with these businesses, he is “invariably dealing with the financial equivalent of a car crash.” How can that be the basis for any judgment that these businesses were viable? The judge in the case stated that some “were capable of rescue” and that there was “deliberate mismanagement of these companies” by the advisers—by the fraudsters. He added that there were “plunderings made from them”, and that “fees and any useful assets” were taken from them. Why would the review ignore a High Court judge? Only four of the 76 cases have been dealt with by means of a consequential loss. All the rest have been dealt with through distress and inconvenience—in other words, all those businesses were dud businesses. That is simply not statistically possible.

Colin Clark (Gordon) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a very forceful speech. This subject is close to many business people’s hearts. Does he agree that because the bank has refused to pay for forensic accounting, victims are left powerless, even if the bank was willing to look at this? As he has just said, the bank simply labelled most of the businesses as failures. It is deliberately making it impossible for the victims to be heard properly with forensic accounting.

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is completely one-sided. It means there is a complete imbalance of power in what is supposed to be an independent review, because the bank itself has phalanxes of advisers, whereas the victims clearly cannot afford to provide for the same number or calibre of advisers. Offers are not made on an open basis; it is a take-it-or-leave-it offer. Imagine, Sir Christopher, that you have been stripped of all your assets over a period of 10 years. You are desperately trying to seek justice, and finally somebody offers you a cheque. Your only other option is to go to the court. What do you do? It is a take-it-or-leave-it offer. If you say, “Actually, I don’t think that is enough,” you get a secondary meeting, but there is no interrogation of the facts; it is simply take it or leave it. That is the nature of the review.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for calling this debate. In fact, I called a debate on this very subject 10 years ago, when my constituents Justin Riggs and Karl Capp told me how they were being treated by their bank. This is one of the biggest frauds to hit many hard-working small business people in this country. The simple point is that the bank, rather than hiding behind regulations and technicalities, should be giving generous and quick compensation to many people who have lost their businesses, because of a fraud that was covered up and hidden for years by senior members of that bank.

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The levels of compensation should be determined by an independent third party, not by the bank itself, because there is no methodology. Nobody can contest the findings of Professor Griggs. There is no way of interrogating how he has arrived at a number. They
simply say—I have heard this so many times from Lloyds directors—“Well, we settled most of the claims,” as if that is somehow an endorsement of the process. The fact is that the victims had no other option—no appeal process—other than going to court, which would have cost millions of pounds.

Victims cannot even get access to the evidence. In a normal court process there would be disclosure of evidence, so that they could see the evidence they are being judged against. There was no disclosure of evidence. Lloyds has found a better way, according to a letter it sent me on 20 September. It said it had “created an alternative approach” to disclosure, “to protect customers interests”. That is its approach. It is complete obfuscation.

Eligibility is determined by the bank itself. It decides who is eligible for the review and who is not by invitation only. Only directors get to decide, not shareholders or suppliers, nor Her Majesty’s Treasury, which must have lost a lot of money through this process in respect of tax. It only dealt directly with the individuals who were convicted, not their deputies or other people who may well have been involved in the fraud. This is not an independent review. Professor Griggs is paid by the bank. His remit is determined by the bank. I have seen evidence that determinations he has made have been overruled by the bank.

This is in no way an independent process. Of course, everybody who goes to it is subject to a gagging order. The bank provided us with confirmation that clause 4 in its settlement agreements does not prevent victims talking to it or to the press. However, I have seen another agreement, completely different from the one the bank provided to the Treasury Committee, which contains extra clauses that do prevent these victims speaking to the press or to the authorities. Justice must be seen to be done. Lloyds bank is the judge, jury and executioner. The all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, of which I am now co-chair, said right from the start that this is the wrong way to deal with the process, but Lloyds pushed on anyway.

Moving on to a solution to these problems, the APPG believes that all cases—anybody who has been subject to the Griggs review—should be re-examined through a completely independent process. The APPG has recommended a financial services tribunal, which would judge cases based on a fair and reasonable test, with one-way cost shifting, so the banks cannot simply keep people out of court by writing huge cheques out to their own lawyer. That would mean that people would get an independent examination of their case. Victims can then get compensation and move on.

We believe that a tribunal is required, with an arbitration process for past claims. There have been four different reviews this year of how we can fill this gap, make this process fairer and get back to a more balanced situation, with restitution and redress. Three of those reviews recommended a financial services tribunal, as we do. The one report that did not was sponsored by the banking industry itself and it simply says that we should increase the powers, remit and jurisdiction of the ombudsman schemes. While that is a good step forward, we do not feel that it is enough.

That addresses compensation, but we need to go further. We need to change the culture in the whole sector, as the hon. Member for Ogmore (Chris Elmore) said. In terms of the Lloyds management, I do not see how the position of the chief executive, António Horta-Osório, is tenable. Given the way that the effective whistleblower has been treated, the way this has been covered up and the way that the process has been deliberately partial, I do not see how the Lloyds management have been consistent with the behaviour required under the senior managers regime. I think António Horta-Osório should resign. I also think he should face investigation under the senior managers regime.

Finally, the Financial Conduct Authority itself—our regulator—has many questions to answer. Why did it approve the scheme? Did it approve the scheme? We have heard conflicting evidence on that. It is a national disgrace that Lloyds has been allowed to operate this sham of a review process. Andrew Bailey himself has questions to answer. Why did he allow the process to continue? Why was he not aware of the patent defects in the process? Nevertheless, the FCA should take charge and undertake an investigation of the senior management under the senior managers regime.

We in this place are defenders of free markets. For me, this is the most important issue that any of us will ever deal with. Certainly, as far as I am concerned, I cannot rest until the matter is settled. My life has been transformed through the opportunities of free markets. In the main, the bankers I have dealt with over 25 years have done a tremendous job—a fair job—to help my business to thrive through some difficulties. I was one of the lucky ones. Not all bankers are the same. Most people in the industry are decent people trying to do the right thing, so it is even more important to hold those who are not to account. We have to make sure that everyone has the opportunities that I have had—that we have had—including all our children and grandchildren. We must all demand, for the sake of the victims, that justice is done and is seen to be done.

4.50 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing the debate. I echo his concerns about the failure of the Griggs review and whether it really provides an outcome for the victims of this terrible fraud, many of whom have suffered far more losses than just financial ones.

The Griggs review was established to offer fast and fair compensation to the victims, but its reality is very different. The all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance has received many representations, as have I, that have described it as a farce, a cynical whitewash and, above all, not fit for purpose, because it is an internal scheme with complete control held by the bank.

We have seen that tactic time and time again in the financial industry. It establishes an internal compensation scheme and conducts an internal investigation to give an illusion of accountability, when the reality is that it can maintain significant control with minimal independent oversight. That is evident from the Dobbs review, which was intended to establish whether issues relating to the HBOS Reading fraud were properly investigated and
appropriately reported to the authorities, and whether individuals in the Lloyds Banking Group deliberately tried to conceal or cover up information relating to the fraud. Although we are not questioning the integrity of Dame Linda and her team, the fact remains that they operate within the scope and parameters set by the bank, and they do not have the statutory powers required for a robust and thorough investigation of the matters.

Worryingly, as has been mentioned, the review will consider events only between 2009 and 2017, thereby ignoring the damning conclusions of the Turnbull report, which states that the cover-up of the fraud commenced as early as 2005. There will also be no interim report and the findings might not even be published. Lloyds bank must ensure that the findings are made public, otherwise the public and Parliament will simply not have confidence in the review.

That still leaves some important questions. Where are the regulators and the investigative agencies in that? The Financial Conduct Authority, the Serious Fraud Office and others seem comfortable to simply outsource their regulatory responsibilities to the organisations being investigated. In a recent letter to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton, the director of the SFO, Lisa Osofsky, stated that it would not be appropriate for the SFO to comment on those matters, given the work that is currently being undertaken by the National Crime Agency and the Dobbs review. It cannot be acceptable that the organisations responsible for investigating fraud at the highest level are content to allow the bank that is under investigation to set the parameters and scope of their investigations. That cannot be right.

UK Finance has recently announced that the industry has agreed to establish a new ombudsman scheme for larger small and medium-sized enterprises with a turnover between £6.5 million and £10 million and a balance sheet up to £10 million. The APPG has written to the Minister with several concerns about the proposals. Crucially, there will still be a gap in accessing justice for those businesses with larger claims above £600,000. The FCA’s consultation on SME access to the Financial Ombudsman Service clearly shows that an award limit of £600,000 would exclude 41% of complainants because their claims would be above that level. The activities of the Global Restructuring Group were upwards of £1.7 million, so the limit would mean that a lot of people would not gain access to justice. Other people watching and experiencing that are questioning the responsibility of our banking system.

We require an independent mechanism for resolving such disputes that can decide cases on a fair and reasonable basis, capture unregulated entities, force the disclosure of information and the attendance of witnesses, and make those decisions in the public domain. That is what a financial services tribunal could do. I am afraid that I believe that is the only mechanism that would give businesses the confidence they require to borrow, that would give justice to those people who have come here today and who are watching outside this place, and that would put the banks back where they belong—as cornerstones of our communities.

4.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on securing the debate. He has been really engaging on the subject and he has been thorough in his investigation. We all appreciate his efforts. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who made a valuable contribution to the debate. The hon. Members who are present are the ones who are usually present when there is a debate to do with banking. It is also good to see the Minister in his place. We have met and discussed these matters on many occasions. We have had copious correspondence—maybe enough to destroy a rainforest in Brazil or something, the letters have been so numerous. It is important that we discuss these matters and bring them forward.

I am conscious of the time, so my comments will be brief. I want to talk about the key point of the debate, which, for me, is in the final substantive paragraphs of the Minister’s letter of 3 December to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton. The letter states:

“From conversations, meetings, and debates over the course of my tenure, I have seen that there are a number of businesses who feel that they have not already had access to a process which can address their complaints. This is why I am glad that the banking industry propose to put in place a method of addressing unresolved historic cases. Established independently of the banking industry, and overseen by a former senior judge, the scheme to consider these cases will make decisions on a ‘fair and reasonable’ basis, be adequately resourced to deal with more complex disputes, and operate in a transparent manner. The industry have also committed to producing proposals on the implementation of the voluntary scheme for future complaints from larger businesses, and I look forward to the next steps in this work. I trust that you welcome these developments, and will continue to work constructively with UK Finance on the delivery of these schemes by September 2019.”

I have two observations on that letter, which I hope the Minister will take note of. My first observation was expressed in part of my published statement that went to The Times’ journalist James Hurley last week, on Monday 3 December, following the publication of the UK Finance report. The article states:

“The Democratic Unionist Party”—which I am privileged to be a member of, and which has been clear about where it stands—“is among those who still believe a tribunal is needed.”

I was quoted as saying that my concerns about UK Finance’s exclusion of the tribunal were “compounded by the legitimate concerns of many SMEs about the independence of past bank-led redress processes.”

This debate is founded on exactly that concern about the Griggs review. Many right hon. and hon. Members have already spoken, and probably will speak, here and elsewhere about the substantive evidence on that matter, including legal opinion, as referenced in The Times. I will return to that shortly.

My second observation is that the Minister clearly believes that the APPG on fair business banking and finance is being actively involved in the process of the development of these schemes with UK Finance. Page 4 of the UK Finance report states:

“UK Finance has been working with member firms, the Government and regulatory authorities to consider the proposals set out in the Walker Review and to consider how the industry can address the important issues raised.”

There seems to be an undertaking and a willingness from the Minister to do that. UK Finance refers to working with the Government, but, respectfully, that comment does not seem to underpin any active recognition or involvement of the APPG and parliamentarians in the development of the process. The hon. Member for
Thirsk and Malton has put that forward clearly in his correspondence. It is my view and that of the Democratic Unionist party that it is a fundamental error to exclude parliamentarians and that it will not help the development of a sound, independent solution. So we look to the Minister to address that issue. He appears to share my view and that of many others that the APPG and other parliamentarians should be actively engaged with UK Finance in compelling a fair solution. When he responds today in this debate, I urge him to reinforce his position for the public record in *Hansard*.

Finally, I come to my key point. Let me put it to the Minister today that we need a decision in his response to this debate on independent redress. Will the Government fully support the involvement of a truly independent public body—the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators—as central in these voluntary redress schemes? For the DUP and—I believe—the public interest, that makes considerable sense, and should both allay SME victims’ legitimate concerns and receive public support from UK Finance, as the institute will be truly independent and competent in considering this subject matter.

The institute would be available for all the historical cases and would be an available choice for complainants in the future, where they prefer not to proceed to an ombudsman for cases below the £600,000 limit, inclusive of the maximum claim limit of £100,000 in consequential damages. So a three-person tribunal is what we are seeking. It could hear cases with an upper compensation limit of the £10 million set out in the APPG’s position statement on 14 November. That is what I would like to see and I believe that is what the hon. Members for Thirsk and Malton and for East Lothian want to see. Indeed, I believe that it is what all of us in this Chamber want to see.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s affirmative response in support of the Chartered Institute of Arbitrators today, so that we can all—please—move forward with confidence and belief that we can actually get somewhere, and so that this particular subject of truly independent redress is finally behind all of us.

I am very conscious of some of the headlines that we have seen recently, such as “Lloyds’ compensation scheme ‘defective’.” The article continued:

“A compensation scheme set up by Lloyds Banking Group for small business owners ruined by a banking fraud has been labelled ‘defective’, based on a ‘flawed’ methodology and ‘partial’ to the bank’s interests.”

It went on to say:

“Legal advice prepared...says that...the level of compensation being paid out ‘gives rise to a real sense of injustice’.”

I will finish with a last comment. The ombudsman-led approach would ensure that small businesses were able to challenge the banks for their past mistakes, while also protecting them in the future, and without the added costs of a tribunal. That is why I believe that it would be the best approach to rebuild trust between business owners and their bankers.

I support what the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton has put forward and I seek a positive response from the Minister; I am sure that it will be forthcoming. However, after all these years of ill-doing—for want of a better word, and I am trying to be very careful with my words—or wrongdoing against people, almost putting them to the wall in banking deals, what I want to see, and what I think our constituents want to see, is a compensation scheme that fully enables people to seek redress for what they have lost. Those who carried out these despicable acts also deserve to be made accountable for their indiscretions and criminal behaviour.

5.3 pm

**Kirsty Blackman** (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Thank you very much for chairing this debate, Sir Christopher, and I thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing it.

As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) suggested, this is a debate that we have had a few different times on a few different but related topics. I also thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton for his diligence and for continuing to raise these issues. I hope that he continues to do so until we get a suitable resolution, preferably from the Government taking action in relation to this issue.

I will just say a few things from the point of view of the Scottish National party and explain our position on this issue. However, I will start by saying that it is absolutely necessary for the economy that banks lend to small and medium-sized enterprises, and it is absolutely necessary for the economy that SMEs can have a good relationship with banks, but that is never going to happen if banks are not trustworthy and are not proving themselves to be trustworthy. If there are issues such as the one that we are considering, the best thing that banks can do is to be as transparent as possible about past issues, to make it clear that they cannot possibly happen again in the future. And if banks such as HBOS-Lloyds were to do that, it would be less likely that other banks would do similar things in the future and make the same mistakes. So, the transparency issue is important on many levels, not least for gaining the support of the public and SMEs for banking institutions.

The way that the cover-up has happened, and the lack of transparency, has meant that the pain has been elongated for those people who have gone through this process. Instead of the banks holding their hands up and saying, “Yep, we made a number of mistakes; here they are and here is the redress that you deserve”, they are trying, at almost every opportunity, to hide things. I do not think that is a very sensible way forward for the banks.

The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton mentioned some of the people who had come forward and who had to work incredibly hard, in order to have their voices heard and their problems raised. I will just take this opportunity to thank those people, too, for the hard work that they put in to make sure that these issues saw the light of day, albeit not yet in the way that we would have liked them to see the light of day. Nevertheless, those people have worked incredibly hard to bring that about and I thank them for it.

The SNP has been clear that we want to see as much transparency as possible in the internal review documents that have been produced, which means ensuring that they are published so that we can see the full position. I know that there are issues about the positions taken in the internal review, but the more of those documents that are published, the better the access to justice there can be for those people who are campaigning.
I will also highlight the fact that the decisions that were taken around a lack of transparency have meant that the public purse has had to pay a disproportionately high cost in relation to this issue. It has meant that any investigations that have taken place have cost more money than they should, because the evidence that was requested has not been provided to them. That is a pretty damning indictment.

The other major issue that I will highlight is the pressurising of people to settle and to sign non-disclosure agreements, which is an abhorrent practice; it just should not happen. To ensure transparency in the future, it is really important that people are able to talk about what happened to them, so that it cannot happen again to anybody else and so that people are not allowed to get away with committing fraud such as this again.

The SNP has called for several policies that would help in the future on this issue. We have repeatedly called for the reinstatement of the reverse burden of proof; the SNP has been incredibly strong on that. Our manifesto also talked about strengthening whistleblowing legislation for those people working in banking organisations, and I will continue to make the case to the Minister that the existing legislation needs to be strengthened.

Lastly, we have pushed hard for a permanent commercial financial dispute resolution platform, an argument not dissimilar to the cases that have been made today. It is so important that SMEs and those individuals whose lives have been ruined do not have to go through an immoral and financially unviable court process to get the redress they should receive, and the Government can take action on that today.

5.8 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Sir Christopher, for calling me to respond to this debate for the Opposition.

I also thank the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for securing the debate and for his work in chairing the all-party parliamentary group on fair business banking and finance, as well as for all the APPG’s continued efforts on this matter; its commitment to securing justice for victims of banking fraud is commendable and important.

The hon. Gentleman, along with some other Members—especially my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—outlined clearly the challenges that people face in making sure that the victims of this scandal receive the redress they deserve through the current compensation scheme.

The actions of HBOS Reading and the then head of the impaired assets division and its corrupt partners were absolutely disgusting. I have read the accounts several times, but each time I reread the testimonies of the victims in advance of a debate such as this one it gives me a sense of rage. I find the injustices and the cynical destruction of other people’s lives unconscionable.

At a minimum, we must offer proper redress to those affected. It should not have been down to those victims to force action to be taken, but unfortunately that is not what we have heard today. Instead, we have heard about the difficulty in appealing against compensation decisions; about the lack of clarity and transparency over decisions; about documents that underpin judgments being hidden from victims; and about a fundamental lack of accountability and independence. Lloyds must explain how it plans to address those ongoing and legitimate concerns. I would like that response to be sent to the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton and for Members present today to be copied in.

The number of contributions today, as well as their depth and detail, shows how pertinent and urgent the matter continues to be. It is important that it does not fall off the agenda, given the political situation, but I do not think it will, looking at the Members present today. We all have a responsibility to keep up the pressure to ensure that victims’ voices are heard. We are talking about much more than financial losses. Victims lost entire livelihoods, their health and, in some cases, their relationships on the basis of what happened to them.

Ten years on from the financial crisis, it is widely agreed that too many people were able to walk away from the serious damage they caused without any form of personal censure. It is clearly a good thing that the perpetrators of the fraud were brought to justice, and Thames Valley police deserves quite a lot of credit for that, as do Paul and Nikki Turner. Without securing a fair outcome for the victims, however, we have no hope of properly rebuilding trust between businesses and their banks in the long term.

Research shows that frighteningly low numbers of small businesses trust their banks to do the right thing by them, and we have to look at how we can improve that trust. We need to restore confidence that there is a level playing field for businesses when they find themselves in conflict with their banks, especially if those working at the bank have committed fraud, as was true in this case. All that makes it even more important that we agree a comprehensive package to properly address the legacy banking scandals that this country faces.

We can rebuild trust in business banking. We need a full public inquiry into all the scandals. We need an independent tribunal system for SMEs. Lastly, we need a much better and more robust system to protect and enable whistleblowing. I will briefly reiterate the case for each of those.

The first step has to be securing proper redress for SMEs that have been mistreated by their banks. Scandals such as this and RBS GRG, which we have all been present to debate in the past, have seriously dented confidence in our banking sector. That is why we have always called for a full public inquiry so that victims can get proper redress. Many colleagues in this room have argued for the same. It is not just about getting to the bottom of who was responsible for such scandals; it is about examining the wider systemic issues that allowed these events to take place. I was struck by the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) making the point that he raised these issues 10 years ago. It is simply too important for us to sweep them under the carpet without securing the ability to say to people, “This will never happen again.”

In terms of disputes, part of the problem is definitely that the gap is too big between the Financial Ombudsman Service for individuals and the full legal process for very big firms. We have all seen the recent report from Simon Walker, alongside the response from UK Finance, arguing that an expanded Financial Ombudsman Service would be sufficient to meet that need. As the Opposition, we believe that, given the severity of the damage done in such cases, we need to go further.
[Jonathan Reynolds]

We support the proposals from the all-party group on fair business banking and finance to establish an independent tribunal to help create that level playing field between businesses and their banks. That is also supported by the Treasury Committee, as outlined in its report on SME finance published on 26 October. We share the Committee’s ultimate conclusion that an independent financial services tribunal is needed to handle more complex disputes, complementing the expansion of the ombudsman’s remit. In our experience so far with voluntary redress schemes, they have been beset by issues. We would not be here today if such schemes were sufficient to meet the need. Ultimately, I do not believe we can convince our constituents that the industry is in a position to self-regulate. That is why an independent tribunal system is necessary.

Lastly, a potential answer could lie in exploring our approach to whistleblowing in financial services in this country. We have to look at why the fraud took so long to uncover and how we can improve internal systems and processes to stop such things ever happening again.

The hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton raised a specific example of how a whistleblower was treated in this case. In the US, the Dodd-Frank Act, introduced as a central piece of post-financial crisis legislation in 2010, is a demonstration of how much more robust the whistleblower protection framework could be. Whistleblowers are entitled to awards if their information leads to enforcement action. It is structured in such a way as to disincentivise false reports and to provide protection in the event of dismissal. The UK legislation, on the other hand, is much thinner. While the Financial Conduct Authority can assist whistleblowers under the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998, that has not been enshrined in financial regulation in the way Dodd-Frank has been used in the US. There is a case for examining whether specific financial services whistleblower protection could be a starting point in seriously improving conduct in banking from the inside out.

In conclusion, if we are to restore trust in UK business banking, two outcomes must be achieved. First, we must ensure that the victims of the HBOS scandal get proper redress for the damage done to their businesses and livelihoods as a result of the appalling conduct by individuals who worked in the bank. The same is obviously true for victims of the RBS GRG scandal. The second responsibility we all share is to ensure that such a flagrant abuse of the bank and business relationship can never happen again on such a scale. The combination of a full, comprehensive public inquiry with a broad enough scope to capture the full breadth of victims, the establishment of an independent financial services tribunal and a radical rethink of how we treat whistleblowers could begin that process. The victims of this scandal were badly let down. I want to be able to stand here and say that they will all get justice and that this can never happen again.

5.15 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I acknowledge the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) in securing this debate and making an excellent speech, as he has done on several occasions this year in this place, and setting out a case that was well reasoned in many elements. I also pay tribute to the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who made fine contributions to the debate.

As we have heard today and in previous debates this year, incidents of banking misconduct and fraud have had a severe impact on some small and medium-sized enterprises. It has been and remains a top priority of mine in office to face up to the issues that have been generated by the cases that have been raised. I am conscious that many of the eight Back-Bench Members who have taken part in this debate will have heard sad and unfortunate stories from their constituents about how the actions of banks have affected them and their businesses. That includes not only the events at HBOS Reading, but the actions of the RBS Global Restructuring Group and the mis-selling of interest rate hedging products.

I begin by reminding Members that we expect the highest standards of behaviour across the financial sector. That is why the Government have introduced a number of necessary changes to restore public trust in financial services, such as the senior managers and certification regime. Before I address the substance of today’s debate, it is important that we pause for a moment to recognise the contribution that banks make to both the UK economy and our society. As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) rightly said, it is necessary for banks to lend to SMEs. Lloyds Banking Group has, for example, increased its net lending to SMEs by £3 billion since 2014 and plans to triple that by 2020. Lloyds is the market leader in providing basic bank accounts, which help vulnerable customers, and its “Helping Britain Prosper” plan sets out a number of commitments on behaviour, diversity and charitable support.

However, I recognise that there has been a great deal of justified anger, within Parliament and beyond, regarding the fraud that was perpetrated against small businesses through the actions of individuals at the HBOS Reading branch. It is important to remember that the events at HBOS Reading constituted criminal activity. As such, it was right that those responsible were brought to justice, as my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton pointed out. The FCA continues to conduct an enforcement investigation into the events surrounding the discovery of misconduct at HBOS Reading, resuming an investigation placed on hold at the request of Thames Valley police. I will be keenly following the progress and outcome of the investigation.

In addition, Lloyds Banking Group has appointed Dame Linda Dobbs, a retired High Court judge, as an independent legal expert to consider whether issues relating to HBOS Reading were investigated and appropriately reported to authorities at the time by Lloyds Banking Group, following its acquisition of HBOS. It will consider issues raised by the Project Lord Turnbull report referred to by my hon. Friend, Dame Linda’s findings will then be shared with the FCA.

It is right that Lloyds set up a compensation scheme for businesses affected by the events at HBOS Reading, overseen by Professor Russel Griggs. That scheme has seen offers made to all customers within its scope, with 90% of customers accepting the offer. However, I acknowledge the concerns that Members have raised
about the Griggs scheme. Those concerns have certainly been heard, and I am pleased to announce that Lloyds has agreed with the FCA that Lloyds will commission a post-completion review to quality-assure the methodology and process of the Griggs scheme. [Interruption.]

Overseen by an independent person, that review will go above and beyond a normal lessons-learned exercise. The independence of the person appointed to lead the review is vital. In particular, I would expect that person not to have been employed by Lloyds in any way, and to be able to demonstrate complete operational independence from Lloyds. I am pleased that Lloyds has committed to publishing the review once it has concluded, and I welcome Lloyds’ commitment to implementing any recommendations it produces. I have been consistently clear that it is vital that we get the right processes and procedures in place, to ensure that SMEs can obtain fair redress and resolve disputes with their banks.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

John Glen: I will closely follow the review of the Griggs scheme. I understand the concerns, but it is a significant step forward that that review will take place, and I will monitor the implementation of both the expanded FOS remit and the industry’s independent voluntary ombudsman schemes. I am confident that we have the right regulatory regime and dispute resolution mechanisms in place for the future. Events similar to those at HBOS Reading should not occur again, and I will do everything in my power in office to ensure that we learn the lessons from those appalling incidents years ago.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

Mr Vaizey: I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) will wind up the debate, so I feel a bit premature intervening on the Chamber, and some of the business owners affected, to hear and see what has actually been going on.

The all-party group on fair business banking and finance was brought to justice. However, more clearly needs to be done to restore SMEs’ trust in the financial services industry. From the numerous meetings that I have had this year with a wide range of stakeholders, it is clear that we are all determined to deliver the best outcomes for SMEs.

The events at HBOS Reading constituted criminal activity. As such, it was right that those responsible were brought to justice. However, more clearly needs to be done to restore SMEs’ trust in the financial services industry. From the numerous meetings that I have had this year with a wide range of stakeholders, it is clear that we are all determined to deliver the best outcomes for SMEs.

The benefits of an ombudsman-style approach are clear, but I recognise that some hon. Members have advocated again today for the establishment of a tribunal to resolve disputes between banks and SMEs. An ombudsman-style approach can deliver fast, free and fair dispute resolution for SMEs, making decisions based on what is fair and reasonable. I believe that a tribunal, on the other hand, would need the regulation of SME lending, potentially restricting SMEs’ access to credit. It would still require SMEs to pay for expensive legal expertise, and it could make decisions only on a strict legal basis. That is why I believe that an expanded FOS remit, alongside the establishment of further independent ombudsman schemes as announced by UK Finance, will ensure the best outcomes for SMEs.

I highlight again that the Government, financial regulators and industry have done considerable work to tackle bad practice and to ensure that SMEs have access to appropriate dispute resolution and redress mechanisms. The all-party group on fair business banking and finance has been a key part of that work, and I sincerely commend its determination in the work that it has undertaken to ensure that SMEs are fairly treated.

Kevin Hollinrake: I thank the Minister for his comments. I hope the people watching the debate, either in the Gallery or at home, understand that they have many
friends in Parliament who want this issue to be dealt with. I know that he does as well. There is such universality of support for dealing with it properly that we will get there in the end, although we are not yet where we need to be.

I appreciate that the Minister is going further than others have gone in the past. Nevertheless, people will be sceptical about the ability of a bank or an independent reviewer, as he called it, to look at the issues and to provide proper redress and a proper method of investigating the complaints. I tried to illustrate in my speech that it was not just about fraud, but about how the corporation itself sought to suppress evidence and a proper investigation of the issues. People are simply not going to accept that anything done voluntarily is fit for purpose.

The Minister is right that I think that a tribunal is the right way forward, rather than simply expanding the ombudsman scheme. For historical cases, it sets a limit of £350,000 as compensation, but every case we deal with is over that figure, so that does not go anywhere near addressing our concerns. It is not the compensation scheme that we need.

I also do not accept that small business lending will suffer if we have more regulation. We simply need a fair and reasonable test for deciding the claims. Ireland introduced regulation for small business lending a few years ago, and its lending has increased significantly since then, so the Minister’s fears are misplaced. We need to ensure that small and medium-sized business interests, which are the most critical interests to our economy, are protected and supported through the process.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the independent review of HBOS Reading.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Train Operating Companies: Yorkshire

9.30 am

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of train operating companies in Yorkshire.

It is truly an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker) and the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) for co-sponsoring this important debate.

Back in June, I stood in the Commons Chamber in a rail debate and my opening words were, “What a mess”. Six months on, I have to repeat that statement: what a mess.

Seven months ago, I had a meeting with Northern rail just ahead of the implementation of the revised timetables. I was unequivocally assured that services would improve and that that would be the answer to a lot of the issues that my constituents were experiencing. I was told that the new timetables had been stress-tested and that everything would be fine. Instead, what we got was absolute, total and utter chaos—and I do not use words and platitudes, but once again there was very little action.

In my constituency, in the six-month aftermath of the May timetable, Dewsbury and Ravensthorpe stations were in the bottom 10 of all smaller stations in the UK for performance: the eighth and third worst respectively. My neighbouring constituency, Huddersfield, was in same bottom 10 of the league table for larger stations. Minster, I will not allow my constituents to receive such treatment from your Government. Things have to get better.

The picture across the whole of Yorkshire has been bleak, hence the title of the debate. Not a single station in Yorkshire was in the top 100 best performers. I am sure the Minister knows that, given that he also represents in Yorkshire was in the top 100 best performers. I am bleak, hence the title of the debate. Not a single station such treatment from your Government. Things have to improve. Using data from trains.im, the monthly performance figures show the region’s two biggest providers, Northern and TransPennine, offered an abysmal service in November, with only 67% and 65% of trains on time respectively—easily as bad as at the height of the timetable crisis and among the worst in recent years. Apart from Brexit and the NHS, this is the biggest item that comes into my mailbox. I do not know how many times I have seen pictures of timetable boards in various stations with lists of cancelled or delayed trains. It really is not good enough.

I must commend The Yorkshire Post—not always the biggest fan of my party—on the work it has done on this issue, which has been absolutely fantastic and is very much appreciated by the many beleaguered commuters who experience the chaos. Earlier this month, it reported that almost 80 trains a day were being cancelled, with overcrowded services frequently running with reduced numbers of carriages. A new timetable, implemented from last week, thankfully offers some small hope of improvement. The first week went better than the first week of the previous timetable, but that would not be hard to beat. When compared to figures over recent months, significant improvement is yet to be seen. From the available data this month, some 77.7% of Northern’s trains have been running on time, up a feeble 0.1% from May’s mayhem. TransPennine has achieved only 73.4% of trains on time this month, down on the 75.5% achieved in May, but up marginally on figures from June and July.

Purchasers are understandably weary of promised improvements, and the Rail Minister’s assurance that the situation has stabilised will undoubtedly be met with a degree of cynicism. For six months, my constituents have been given nothing but empty promises and false assurances. It was bad enough through the summer, but we can add to their misery the recent dark, freezing cold mornings on station platforms that are less than adequate, with a degree of cynicism. For six months, my constituents have been given nothing but empty promises and false assurances. It was bad enough through the summer, but we can add to their misery the recent dark, freezing cold mornings on station platforms that are less than adequate, with many little shelter from the elements, and barely fit for purpose. Compensation was promised, but for many it was never received. Hours were spent filling in forms to no avail. I have heard of rail users who purchase their tickets through corporate reduction schemes being refused compensation. Apparently, because they get a discount on their travel, they should not be entitled to refunds, despite the fact that many pay more than £1,000 a year and the level of inconvenience and lost work hours were the same for them as for everybody else.

An expanded compensation scheme has been announced this week for Northern’s customers, starting with 25% for 15 to 30 minutes’ delay. That is reportedly funded by the Government, not the privately owned operator. Sadly, it is far too little far too late. Why was the money not invested in our rail services to prevent the need for such an enhanced compensation scheme? Even as Northern warns that passengers will not see an improvement in services until May 2019, unbelievably its fares are set to rise by 3.2% in the new year. It is clear that regulated fares should be frozen into the new year. I call on the service performance of any station. Again, eight of the 10 worst performing stations in the UK are within the northern powerhouse. In contrast, nine of the top 10 best performing stations in the country are in London. This country does not revolve around the capital city of London; there is much more beyond the M25.

Neither is the picture over recent months greatly improved. Using data from trains.im, the monthly performance figures show the region’s two biggest providers, Northern and TransPennine, offered an abysmal service in November, with only 67% and 65% of trains on time respectively—easily as bad as at the height of the timetable crisis and among the worst in recent years. Apart from Brexit and the NHS, this is the biggest item that comes into my mailbox. I do not know how many times I have seen pictures of timetable boards in various stations with lists of cancelled or delayed trains. It really is not good enough.
Minister to back the Transport Committee’s suggestion of discounts for those renewing their season tickets for 2019, meaning no price increase.

My constituent, Sophie, has been commuting from Mirfield in my constituency to Leeds every weekday for the past three years. Sophie is partially sighted and has to rely on public transport to get to work. She wrote to me last week to express her many grave concerns. She spoke about the issues at Mirfield station, which I have been raising for more than three years, and how the platforms lack basic facilities, with one being completely inaccessible to people with disabilities. Indeed, the charity Leonard Cheshire Disability points out that across Yorkshire and the Humber, 33% of train stations are not step-free, making them inaccessible for many disabled people.

Sophie also reports a lack of appropriate shelter against the cold winter elements and how nearly every morning she has to queue to buy a ticket when she arrives in Leeds because the train is so overcrowded that the conductor has not been able to pass through the train, and the one new ticket machine at Mirfield is on the opposite platform and is often out of order. Sophie feels incredibly grateful that she is still in employment. She says that it is solely down to her having an understanding boss who has afforded her the flexibility to work around the many train delays that she has had to endure. The past six months have been hell for Sophie and many people like her.

I also want to mention my constituent, Alex, who works near Manchester. He gets the train every morning from Dewsbury. He has had to take nearly two thirds of next year’s annual leave allocation because of the trains’ lack of punctuality. He feels he is getting to the point of despair.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Alex’s case exemplifies the bigger point that if we are to rebalance our economy successfully, we need to get the rail infrastructure right between the great northern cities of Sheffield, Leeds and Manchester. Does she agree that that requires investment in the long term, and, in the short term, making the best of what we have? Does she also agree that it is an outrage that one in four of the rail services is funnelled into London and the south-east.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that interventions are supposed to be brief, particularly when so many would like to speak.

Paula Sherriff: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I absolutely agree. A very similar level of service is being delivered to my constituents, so I fully sympathise with his constituents.

Late or cancelled trains have a wide impact. Many of us consider a train to be something that gets us from A to B. Of course that is true, but the disruption is also having a significant impact on people’s mental health. They have no idea whether they will be able to get to work, and can get into quite serious trouble when they are late for the fourth day running. People might rely on them, such as clients or customers. They do not know whether they will get home in time to put their children to bed or see their partner. That is having a massive effect on family life and on social mobility, as not everybody drives. It is also affecting employment opportunities. I have spoken to a number of people who now say that they cannot get to work. They do not drive, so using the train is the only option, and it is not worth the stress.

Our region’s railways are among the least reliable in the country. Ironically, this week Northern Rail unveiled a new advertising campaign, designed with safety in mind, to prevent passengers from boarding the trains as the doors are closing. The advert states that the train will depart the station “to the second”. If only! As I see it, there are two major issues with that. First, someone in the advertising department either has a very strange sense of humour or has severely misjudged the situation, given that so many trains have not departed on time during the last six months. Secondly, the campaign is in preparation for when Northern rail removes guards from trains, thus compromising customer safety and further eroding the service on offer to rail users in the north.

As a result of the chaos, many of those who drive, as I alluded to earlier, are turning back to their cars as a means of transport. Falling passenger numbers require action to boost confidence in and accessibility to the rail network. That has sadly not been forthcoming. Rail in the north is still very much the poor relation of services across the country. Recent research from the Institute for Public Policy Research North revealed that spending on transport in Yorkshire and the Humber fell by more per head from 2016-17 to 2017-18 than anywhere else in the country. It reported that, last year, spending per head on transport in our region was £315, which is more than three times less than the £1,019 spent in London. It is simply unacceptable that promised investment has been scrapped, downgraded or delayed, while money is funnelled into London and the south-east.

When it comes to the causes of the poor service, leaves on the line can be blamed for only so much. Indeed, when discussing compensation for rail passengers on BBC News this week, the Minister admitted that the infrastructure is not there to cope. Work to electrify key lines in the north-west was supposed to be finished two years ago, yet delays to that have had a knock-on effect across the north and have been blamed by Northern rail for its postponement of planned service improvements in Yorkshire.

The Minister blames decades of decline for the infrastructure’s inability to cope with network growth, yet it seems likely that the Transport Secretary is set to back a deeply flawed plan for the trans-Pennine route. If the plans that have been mooted go ahead, the tunnels will not be big enough to carry modern freight trains, and insufficient track is planned to allow faster trains to overtake slow ones.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend and neighbour is making a great speech. I must apologise—I have just sat on a broken-down train for half an hour, so she has even more sympathy than usual. She is right: what happened to the northern powerhouse? What happened to those promises of investment in our region?
Paula Sherriff: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for that intervention, and I look forward to the Minister’s response to that question.

Frankly, what we have heard from our Transport Secretary, who recently said that he does not “do trains”, shows an appalling lack of ambition for the north. It will do nothing to address the problems of reliability, as both passenger and freight demand on the lines increase. Ministers need to get to grips with much-needed rail improvements. The system is clearly broken, and local rail users know that more than a mediocre compensation scheme is needed to fix it. Passengers need to know that when there is a delay or cancellation they will receive proper compensation, and Northern rail’s expanded delay repay scheme announced this week is welcome. However, the scheme is reportedly funded by the Government. Going forward, it is not acceptable that the taxpayer foots the bill for the failing system, while shareholders continue to be put first.

What people really need is to know that, rare exceptions aside, their trains will be reliable and punctual. The Transport Secretary has overseen review after review of the rail network, but it is still clear that the franchise system and the separation of infrastructure and operations simply do not work. Resources are not being targeted to where they are most needed, and there is an overarching lack of accountability. The Transport Secretary has cancelled massive projects such as Crossrail for the north, but has still been able to dig up money for London and the south-east—all while Yorkshire saw the biggest fare increase in the country.

We need clarity over responsibility within our rail network to ensure that services put the interests of passengers first, not the financial priorities of shareholders or the political priorities of Ministers. What assurances can the Minister give me that there will be real improvements to Yorkshire’s rail network, and on what timeframe? Beyond an optimism that operators will adopt more passenger-focused services, what sanctions will be imposed where that is not delivered? Also, where rail operators fail, as they have persistently over the last year, what moves will be taken to renationalise those services, and how low is the bar for that to be a real consideration?

Enough is enough. My constituents and I are sick of hearing warm words and platitudes from the Government. Going forward, it is not acceptable that rail users know that more than a mediocre compensation for securing this important debate. I have an awful lot of time for her, and a great deal of time for Dewsbury, having stood there as a candidate one year—not against my hon. Friend, who I am sure would have wiped the floor with me. I endorse many of her comments completely, particularly those regarding the impact on her constituents.

I was lucky enough to be chosen to lead a debate in September on exactly the same issues. I have to say that since that debate things have got worse, not better. I spoke about some of the commuting difficulties for my constituents, regarding not just the service itself, but the lack of communication around the services. Scheduled services running from York to Scarborough were stopped at Malton and unloading all passengers at that station, which has no toilets and no café. People did not know that they would be unloaded at Malton; they expected to go through to Scarborough.

It was completely disgraceful. The least people might have expected was for TransPennine to have told them at York that they would be unloaded at Malton. They could therefore have stayed at York until the arrival of a through train to Scarborough. It is simply unacceptable that, this summer, 56 trains were stopped at Malton in those circumstances; in the summer of 2017, only six trains were. That represents how bad the service has been.

TransPennine has made lots of promises about improvements. It has said that changing the driver rotas should improve things, and that some of the improvements in the north-west should have resulted in improvements to the service. However, that improvement in the service has simply not happened. In fact, November was the worst month this year for punctuality on the service through to the east coast—only 65% of trains arrived on time, and 20% of trains were defined as late, which is again the worst performance of the year. It is simply not acceptable for TransPennine to say, “We’ve had these problems and things are getting better.” They are not getting better. The least we might have expected is for the communication to be getting better, and it does not seem to be.

I concur with my hon. Friend’s comments on increases in rail fares. Generally, it is right that fares increase, as long as some of the investment goes into our railways—it is clearly good that we are seeing the levels of investment that we are in our railways. However, where there is such terrible performance, it does not seem right that the people responsible for that performance also increase fares. I wonder what the Minister can say about that. Are there any sanctions available to him that he could impose on TransPennine to emphasise that it should not put fares up until the service has improved, as an incentive to improve the service? The political pressure is just not getting through. We are all talking about this, but the service is not improving.

I wrote to the regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, to ask for the inclusion of TransPennine in the inquiry into Northern and Govia Thameslink. I felt that the inquiry related to communications, and I do not know why it did not include TransPennine. At this point in time, when things have not improved and the service is clearly below par, it seems perfectly reasonable that the regulator should look into that in a more detailed way. Could the Minister apply pressure on the regulator to include TransPennine in the inquiry?
There is some good news; there is no question about that. Despite some of the comments about investment, we are seeing higher levels of investment. Part of the problem has been the investment in the north-west. The delays in the engineering works for that have had the knock-on effect of causing delays on the trains. We are looking forward to the doubling of the frequency of journeys from York through to Scarborough by the end of next year, which will be welcomed by many of my constituents, with longer trains, better trains and new trains. That is all very good, but I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury that we need a more strategic approach to investment right across the north.

My hon. Friend signed the letter that I sent to the Chancellor; in fact, 82 parliamentarians, including many who are here today, did so. It asked for a doubling of investment right across the north over the next 30 years. We are waiting for the Transport for the North report, and when we get that, the 82 parliamentarians who signed that letter need to work together collectively to lobby for a step change in investment over a long period of time. I think the figure of £100 billion is what we had in the letter. Some of that funding was for Northern Powerhouse Rail, which we all want to see—to bring forward that scheme so that it arrives at the same time as High Speed 2. I prefer to call that scheme Crossrail for the north, because that might move us up the pecking order.

On the comparison with investment in London, London is a great place, and I love being down here, but the level of investment is phenomenal. That leads to prosperity, because higher productivity leads to higher prosperity, and people in London are 50% more productive than people in the regions—not just the north, but right across the country. That is why average wages in London are 50% higher than in the rest of the country, and certainly than in the north. One thing leads to another. Investment leads to productivity, which is good for the UK economy and great for our constituents, because they become more prosperous as a result. We need a longer-term approach. It is a wonderful vision that we might see Crossrail for the north, or Northern Powerhouse Rail, connecting Liverpool to Manchester to Bradford to Leeds to York to Hull to Scarborough. It will transform opportunities right across the north, and that is exactly what we want.

Mr Sheerman: The hon. Gentleman and I are joint chairs of the all-party parliamentary group for Yorkshire and Northern Lincolnshire. Will he agree that many of us still believe that calling a halt to HS2 and investing that money in the sorts of trains our constituents travel on every day is better than this vanity project, which is going to cost £100 billion?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is a very interesting point. I am sure, Dame Cheryl, that you have your own view on it, which you might wish to express. At the very least, I would like to see Northern Powerhouse Rail, High Speed 3 or Crossrail for the north—whatever we want to call out—delivered at the same time. That is far more important than the north-south journeys.

The critical thing for me is to connect the cities, which gives opportunities to rural areas as well, and the key issue is devolution. The money and the powers should be devolved up to the north, so we do not have to come to Whitehall to ask for the money or to discuss where it should be spent—we should get the money in a long-term settlement. Devolution is key. It is great to see one of the current Mayors here, the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis), who is trying to work through the Sheffield devolution deal, which is very welcome. I think that devolution to the cities across Yorkshire—rather than to the wider county—is far more workable, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will make a great job of the devolution deal he has on his table.

I am absolutely determined, as many here today are, to make sure we get a step change in investment, and to solve the shorter-term problems that the hon. Member for Dewsbury pointed to in her very compelling speech.

9.56 am

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake), who spoke thoughtfully and forensically about the rail issues across Yorkshire, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), who spoke with great passion and vigour. I will just make a few remarks very quickly.

There are two main lines throughout the Keighley constituency, the Airedale and Wharfedale lines, which were electrified in 1994. Many people built their lives—their journeys into work and their children’s journeys to school, and so on—around those lines. Traditionally, they have been high performing, which makes it even more frustrating for so many people that over the last year the performance levels have sunk abysmally low. I will not rehearse the statistics we have already heard from my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Dewsbury, but there is a frustration among Members of Parliament about what we can do to change the situation. We plead with Ministers. We plead with Northern and TransPennine. To be fair to the ordinary middle managers there, they try to get back to us, but they seem powerless to effect change.

Paula Sherriff: Does my hon. Friend agree that in order to achieve improvements, we will work in a cross-party way with the Minister and with the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton, and that we will do anything in our capability to try to make things better for our constituents?

John Grogan: That was very well put, and I was going to make that point. I am genuinely pleased that we have the Minister and the shadow Minister in their places. There is now some Yorkshire influence on the issue and, I hope, some Yorkshire common sense.

In my frustration, I have been considering who we can write to, so I am writing today to Deutsche Bahn, which ultimately owns Northern rail. We are told that we cannot possibly have nationalisation, but we have a nationalised rail company in Northern rail—it just happens to be German. The whole reputation of Deutsche Bahn is under threat here. I hope that, in the new year, a very senior executive of Deutsche Bahn will come to this House and talk to hon. Members from Yorkshire.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): If my hon. Friend needs any more support for his letter, I am sure everyone in this room would be very happy to add their names.
John Grogan: Let us make it a joint letter, sending Christmas wishes to Germany.

Without delaying the House too much longer, it would be remiss not to mention the strike, which is causing difficulties for the Yorkshire economy. There was some good news when it appeared that Transport for the North and, I think, the Government acknowledged that there would be a second person on all trains, but there seems to be an issue about the detail of what that second person would do. In Scotland, a deal was done where the guard would continue to have a safety-critical role—the driver would open the doors and the guard would close them. There are compromises that can be reached. Having beer and sandwiches at No. 10 is perhaps out of fashion, but we need Ministers to get the different parties together to end this strike and have proper negotiations.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents travel from Otley to my hon. Friend’s constituency to catch the train on the Wharfedale line, and they all find that the trains are overcrowded. Without the guard, they would really struggle to use that service, particularly as the bus and train times are not compatible with each other. They need that additional support when they reach train stations on the Wharfedale line.

John Grogan: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. His constituents are very welcome at Burley in Wharfedale, Menston, Ilkley and so on. I believe in the critical safety role of the guard.

I will move on to talk about Boxing day trains. One consequence of the disruption on Northern and TransPennine is that they are not fulfilling their promise—it was in the franchise—to run Boxing day trains. Northern and their franchise were meant to run 60 Boxing day trains this year, and TransPennine were meant to have proposals that would be funded by Government. There are no Boxing day trains in Yorkshire, but there are four lines in the south-east of England that will be running Boxing day trains. The following football teams have home games in Yorkshire: Leeds United, Sheffield United and Barnsley. Harrogate are playing against Halifax—a big local derby in the lower leagues—and I will be watching Guiseley play against Bradford Park Avenue.

There is demand for public transport and trains on Boxing day. Buses now run in Leeds, Bradford and some other Yorkshire cities, whereas they did not a decade ago. Some people cannot go home for Christmas from London to Yorkshire, because they have to be at work on 27 December and they cannot get a train back on Boxing day. There are also the issues of the environment and of loneliness—not everyone relishes being at home for 72 hours at a stretch, in some cases on their own. I appeal to the Minister: let us have Boxing day trains, as in the franchise, on Boxing day 2019. I think he can be the man to deliver that.

We have not yet heard much of London North Eastern Railway in this debate. I understand that it has promised to have seven direct trains to London, which were meant to start in May 2019—previous transport Ministers have assured us that they would. My understanding is that they will now start in the autumn of next year, and I wonder whether the Minister can confirm that today. Lots of businesses in Bradford are really looking forward to those direct trains to London.

Finally, I want to share a railway success story, which is about the role of heritage railways. They will be running across Yorkshire during the holiday period. My distinguished predecessor Bob Cryer was instrumental in saving the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway, and my distinguished predecessor Ann Cryer is president of that railway. I have to report to Members that its “Santa special” on Christmas Eve is completely full—even the local MP cannot get a ticket. I am assured that if there are any cancellations, tickets will be available on Facebook.

Mr Sheerman: Bob Cryer used to shovel coal on the train. Has my hon. Friend been doing that?

John Grogan: There are many ways in which I cannot live up to my distinguished predecessor Bob Cryer, and that is just one of them.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is always a delight to follow my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan), and I particularly agree with his comments about Northern, which were very well made. I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) on securing this timely debate. She set out very clearly the appalling statistics of what has been happening over the past six to nine months in Yorkshire and the suffering that passengers have had to endure.

I want to talk specifically about TransPennine and First Hull Trains. Both companies are part of FirstGroup, which made millions in profit in the last financial year. I will give some experiences of passengers. The first reads: “Happy Bank Holiday weekend, TransPennine Express. I’m sure we’ll have a good one too when my husband eventually gets on your train service from Leeds to Hull. He’s still sat on the platform. It’s the fifth night in a row, and he has missed his son’s bedtime.”

I have also had constituents write to me to say that they are moving away from Hull because of the unreliability of the service when they want to commute to Leeds. On overcrowding, which has become an issue over the past year:

“If you want intimacy but you’re too scared to seek it out, take a TransPennine Express train instead, and press yourself against four strangers for two hours.”

TransPennine Express decided earlier this year as part of its timetabling changes that it would increase the length of the journey from Hull across to Manchester by adding four additional stops. When questioned about this by the Hull and Humber chamber of commerce, TransPennine apparently said that the timetable development will enhance connectivity to and from Hull.

It actually adds about 15 additional minutes to the journey. There was no consultation or discussion—TransPennine just decided to do this themselves. This does not fit with the northern powerhouse—connectivity between the great cities of the north. It should be reducing journey times, not increasing them.

When we three Hull MPs asked to meet Leo Goodwin, the head of TransPennine Express who has a pay package of £360,000, he would not. In fact, when we had the meeting with the chamber of commerce, we empty-chaired him: we had a chair with his name on, because he would not come and talk to us. We shamed him into coming to
explain to us why TransPennine had taken that action. It is clear that there are cancellations and there is late running, and people are being squashed in like sardines on the service from Leeds.

In Hull, we feel like we are at the end of the line and often forgotten. We are not getting new trains; we are getting refurbished trains as part of the TransPennine refurbishment stock. The city of Hull does not have a direct train to Manchester airport, but Scarborough—a small and important town—does. We now have longer journeys across the Pennines due to the changes that TransPennine made, and we do not have a direct service from Hull to Liverpool—the area that we know is the spine of the northern powerhouse.

I would like the Minister to respond to our requests. We think that we should have a half-hourly additional express service from Hull and a direct link to Manchester airport. I also want to mention TransPennine Express, because it runs Hull station on behalf of Network Rail. We have been voted the ninth-worst station in the UK by Passenger Focus. We had £1.4 million spent to improve facilities that were supposed to be for city of culture in 2017, but which did not finish until 2018. We have smaller waiting rooms, smelly toilets and gaffer tape over the signage in the station. We have a Christmas tree that was put up and then surrounded with bollards and hazard tape. The lack of pride that TransPennine has in our station just beggars belief. We have had no station manager for months; we have had remote management from Huddersfield.

Paula Sherriff: I have a similar problem at Dewsbury. We do not have any toilets in our stations, and TransPennine Express have suggested that my constituents and passengers using the station should use the pub nearby. For cultural and other reasons, many people are not comfortable going into the pub to use the bathrooms. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is a disgrace that a very busy station should not have any toilet facilities in this day and age?

Diana Johnson: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There are real questions for the Department for Transport about whether TransPennine is meeting its franchise specification.

We were really proud in Hull to get the open-access operator Hull Trains in September 2000—we had to fight to do so. It has been a brilliant flagship open operator service since 2000, but it has really deteriorated in the past 12 months. It has only four trains, which are constantly being taken off to be repaired. They are class 180s—people who know about these things have told me that they are not fit for purpose for the route that they travel every day on the east coast main line. Customers are so frustrated at the cancellations and the services that stop at Peterborough or Doncaster. They do not feel that Hull Trains is giving them fair information in good time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who unfortunately could not be here this morning, has asked me to say that Hull Trains is due to get new trains at the end of 2019, which is very welcome. However, we think that First Group needs to put pressure on to get those trains to us sooner. The past 12 months have been disastrous for Hull Trains’ customer relations. We need those trains in Hull as soon as possible. The managing director told me that she might be able to get an additional train from somewhere else after Christmas. That is welcome, but Hull Trains really needs to sort itself out. I am pleased that the Minister, a Yorkshire MP, is in his place, and I hope we will start to see some real changes over the next few months in rail services in the north.

10.10 am

Judith Cummins (Bradford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) on securing this important and timely debate. It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend. I want to mention TransPennine Express.

Northern Rail, which serves Bradford on the Leeds-Bradford, Airedale and Wharfedale lines, has provided especially poor service. Since the new timetable was introduced, an average of 2.5% of trains have been cancelled, and 4.6% have operated in our region with fewer carriages than planned. On a typical day, about 100 to 200 passengers are left behind at stations in Yorkshire. They are stranded and are late for work and critical appointments that they need to get to. Unfortunately, despite the criticism that the train operating companies and the Department for Transport have come under since May, we have still not had a significant improvement in service levels. In fact, The Yorkshire Post found that rail punctuality is even worse now than it was in the immediate aftermath of the timetabling change. In November, only 62% of TransPennine Express services and 67% of Northern services arrived on time. Eight months on from the initial problems, it is shocking that the industry appears not to have got a grip on this issue. Passengers in Bradford and across Yorkshire have experienced almost a year of delays, cancellations and disrupted service. Despite that, fares continue to rise above inflation. It is simply not good enough; we deserve better.

As the Office of Rail and Road reported, the responsibility for the fiasco must be shared between the train operating companies, Network Rail and the Department for Transport. Each failed to prepare for the changes, and there was a clear lack of leadership at all levels.

It is also worth looking at the longer term causes of the crisis. There has been a persistent and longstanding underfunding of transport infrastructure in the north. As well as addressing the immediate problems with the performance of train operating companies, the Government must commit to revising the way that rail investment decisions are made. As a start, they should commit to working with Transport for the North to deliver Northern Powerhouse Rail as a priority. Bradford, like other towns and cities across the north, urgently needs that high-speed rail link to meet growing demand and fulfil our economic potential. It is only by investing in rail infrastructure, planning for future timetable changes...
and ensuring that passenger interests are at the heart of our rail system that we will prevent a repeat of the unacceptable service we have seen in recent months.

**Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): My hon. Friend referred to the work of the Transport Committee, which looked at timetabling and rail infrastructure investment. Does she share my concern that, according to the figures for the national infrastructure and construction pipeline, planned spending on transport per capita in Yorkshire is set to be the lowest of all the regions? It was not only lower in the past, but will be lower in the future—in 2017-18 and 2020-21?

**Judith Cummins**: I share my hon. Friend’s concern, and we all share her outrage.

**Mr Sheerman**: It is really simple: deep into the 21st century, towns and cities in Yorkshire should be connected by a regular, good, safe service that everyone can depend on. How can it be that my constituents and I cannot get to Bradford easily from Huddersfield? Why has the line between Huddersfield and Wakefield been closed, with a tremendous impact on those cities? Will my hon. Friend join me in going on those trains and waving banners?

**Judith Cummins**: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. It is an immense frustration for me, as a Bradford MP, that we are not properly connected with the rest of the north. That causes problems and limits my constituents’ learning, development and job opportunities, which are crucial to a city like mine.

10.15 am

**Thelma Walker** (Colne Valley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) for securing this important debate on a subject that concerns so many of our constituents and impacts negatively on the quality of their lives.

Here we are in Westminster Hall. The Chamber is prepared, the Chair is in her place and the Clerks are ready to give advice. The Westminster staff have ensured efficiently that everything is in readiness for our debate. We are on time and we have enough seats. Members and Ministers are prepared. It is the expectation that that will happen. When my constituents buy a ticket for a rail journey or a season ticket, which will be subject to another price hike of more than 3% in January, their expectation is that there will be a regular, accessible train service with enough carriages and available seats. Their expectation is that the trains will get them to their destination on time without stress or discomfort. Those are not unreasonable expectations. They expect that that will happen, just like this debate.

Sadly, the reality for my Colne Valley constituents travelling on the TransPennine route to either Leeds or Manchester is that they are packed like sardines on trains with not enough seats available. There are frequent cancellations and severe delays. For the privilege of all that, they pay among the highest fares in Europe.

Slaithwaite and Marsden are two of the worst-performing stations in the country. Recently at Slaithwaite, 4% of trains have run on time. In the same period, 6% of trains were cancelled. It is not right that there is a greater chance of a train being cancelled than running on time. There are frequently two or three-hour gaps in service. That is what commuters in my constituency face daily. They struggle to get to work on time, and some have been issued formal warnings. They spend less time with their families because they need to leave earlier, or they struggle to make childcare arrangements to accommodate unpredictable service changes. Many have told me that they are reluctantly starting to drive to work because the services are so unreliable. The human cost is significant, and I do not believe the Government fully comprehend it.

This is not just about individuals. Businesses in my constituency have felt the impact since the chaos began in the summer. Rail user groups estimate that usage at peak times is down by about 30% since the timetable change. People may be less likely to visit our picturesque villages and support our local businesses if they cannot guarantee that they will be able to get home after their visit.

I have been working with local rail groups—Slaithwaite and Marsden Action on Rail Transport and Stalybridge to Huddersfield Rail Users Group—along with my hon. Friends the Members for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) and for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), to campaign on these issues and advocate for a better service. I have met the Secretary of State three times. In our most recent meeting, he agreed to facilitate a discussion between rail user groups and senior rail officers about improving co-ordination between Network Rail and train operators. It was accepted that the poor accessibility at Marsden station is unsatisfactory and that, to address it, temporary ramps should be put in place as soon as possible. I will not hold my breath.

In the meantime, my constituents are returning to their cars, changing jobs or even moving away from our lovely Colne Valley villages. They want to be home in time to put their children to bed or pick them up from nursery. They want to get to work on time or catch their flight to go on holiday. Those are not unreasonable asks.

One way commuters in my constituency are using their additional time while they stand on cold platforms is by sharing their experiences with rail companies and me on social media. I would like to share some of the feedback I have received on Twitter. Jane said:

“This morning I forked out £2,572 for my annual season ticket to Manchester. Tonight I arrived into Huddersfield 21 minutes late and missed my hourly connection. It’s not good enough.”

Lisa said:

“People need to wake up and see what impact the May timetable changes have had on our villages. All I want for Christmas is to be able to get to work on time. #unhappycommuter.”

Bob said:

“The timetable’s changed but I think they just blew it. They still can’t get trains t’stop at Slewit!”

Ouch.

We are coming up to Christmas. A present for my Colne Valley constituents would be on-time, regular and accessible trains, with enough seats and space for passengers, and affordable ticket prices. Instead of the 12 days of Christmas, we have the 12,000-plus delays of Christmas. Colne Valley people deserve better.

10.20 am

**Stephanie Peacock** (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley
Thelma Walker, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) on securing this important debate. As a fellow Yorkshire MP, I share her concerns, as well as those highlighted by all hon. Friends present, about the unacceptable train services in our region. She spoke very well and highlighted that she knows only too well the problems with those services. We all receive huge amounts of correspondence from rightly dissatisfied constituents.

Time and time again, constituents share with me the unacceptable number of delayed or cancelled rail services. People in Barnsley are forced to endure—particularly at rush hour—the ancient, overcrowded and overpriced trains that they are packed into when one eventually arrives. Many are forced to spend a fortune on alternative travel arrangements on top of the already inflated rail season tickets for which they have paid nearly £2,000—the annual cost between Barnsley and Leeds, for example.

I will use this opportunity, as so many hon. Members have done, to share some of the stories that constituents have shared with me. One wrote to me about the toll that the substandard rail services are taking on their mental health, as delays consistently cause them to arrive home late and miss out on family life. Another voiced his worry that his son, who is working his first job at a shopping centre little more than half an hour away, is forced to leave hours early to make it on time, and still faces termination to his employment because he cannot manage to do so. That is, quite simply, completely and utterly unacceptable.

Those people are just trying to go about their daily lives, get to work on time and get home again. Instead, they are continually out of pocket, let down, and possibly losing their jobs. They are continually out of pocket, let down, and possibly losing their jobs. Instead, those people are effectively barred from travelling independently, and miss out on the amazing culture and opportunities in nearby cities. The Equality Act 2010 requires that all station operators take reasonable steps to ensure that they do not discriminate against disabled people. Hopefully, the Minister will update us on the precise action that the Government are taking to ensure that operators meet this crucial legal requirement.

Underpinning all of this is the infrastructure, which is sadly lacking. Detailed plans for the long-promised electrification of the trans-Pennine route remain as elusive as ever. When I inquired earlier this year, the Secretary of State refused to tell me whether the whole route would be electrified. Perhaps the Minister can venture a response. Although I welcome the much-vaunted introduction of new rolling stock to our network—which, incidentally, has been delayed until next spring—given the existing infrastructure, I fear it will have little effect on reliability.

Batley station is ranked in the bottom 15 in the whole nation for performance. Over the last six months—bear in mind that Batley is a small station—459 services have been cancelled. Less than 10% of services overall have been on time. Barely a week goes by when a constituent does not alert me to yet another failing. Just last week, I was contacted by several people who were furious that the direct TransPennine service from Batley to Manchester had been removed without their knowledge. They only made the discovery as they arrived at the station on Monday morning. They now have to change in Huddersfield, subject to further potential delays and cancellations.

Such chaos and uncertainty are damaging to my constituency. People have to make frantic phone calls to employers with the familiar message, “I’m going to be late, again.” Children wonder where their parents are as they struggle to get back in time to collect them. Some are considering uprooting their families from the communities they love out of exasperation. Those are not just stories, Minister; they are people’s lives.

After several meetings with Ministers on Transport for the North, Northern and TransPennine, it is clear to me that the issues go way beyond just reliability and performance. Shamefully, Batley station does not have permanent disabled access. Of the 16 stations in the district of Kirklees, only eight can accommodate disabled passengers. Those people are effectively barred from travelling independently, and miss out on the amazing culture and opportunities in nearby cities. The Equality Act 2010 requires that all station operators take reasonable steps to ensure that they do not discriminate against disabled people. Hopefully, the Minister will update us on the precise action that the Government are taking to ensure that operators meet this crucial legal requirement.

Tracy Brabin (Batley and Spen) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you Dame Cheryl; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff), for securing this important debate. Our constituencies are both served by the trans-Pennine rail route and we face many of the same issues.

The local rail network is vital to many of my Batley and Spen constituents, and crucial for our long-term economic prosperity. Its importance has increased since 2010, as our bus services have been slashed due to a lack of Government investment. The town of Batley—home to the only active railway station in my constituency—lies between Leeds and Manchester on the trans-Pennine rail route, but as one constituent wrote to me: “Every day, I have to fly from Batley every day and, for the life of me, I cannot understand why it is so desirable to have a service that has descended into farce”. What should be a simple commute has turned into a recurring nightmare.

Every time I visit Batley station, commuters are eager to share their anger: anger at the packed train that does not stop and whizzes past; anger at the cancellations announced seconds before the train is due to arrive; and, for those lucky enough to cram themselves on to a carriage, anger that they are paying so much for the privilege. Now, almost eight months on from the timetable debacle, I discover that Batley station is ranked in the bottom 15 in the whole nation for performance. Over the last six months—bear in mind that Batley is a small station—459 services have been cancelled. Less than 10% of services overall have been on time.

Underpinning all of this is the infrastructure, which is sadly lacking. Detailed plans for the long-promised electrification of the trans-Pennine route remain as elusive as ever. When I inquired earlier this year, the Secretary of State refused to tell me whether the whole route would be electrified. Perhaps the Minister can venture a response. Although I welcome the much-vaunted introduction of new rolling stock to our network—which, incidentally, has been delayed until next spring—given the existing infrastructure, I fear it will have little effect on reliability.

Batley station is only as welcoming as it is thanks to the attentions of a fantastic group of volunteers called the Friends of Batley Station. They have spent weekends planting flowers and creating a café, with the backing of Government investment. The town of Batley—home to the only active railway station in my constituency—lies between Leeds and Manchester on the trans-Pennine rail route, but as one constituent wrote to me: “Every day, I have to fly from Batley every day and, for the life of me, I cannot understand why it is so desirable to have a service that has descended into farce”. What should be a simple commute has turned into a recurring nightmare.

Every time I visit Batley station, commuters are eager to share their anger: anger at the packed train that does not stop and whizzes past; anger at the cancellations announced seconds before the train is due to arrive; and, for those lucky enough to cram themselves on to a carriage, anger that they are paying so much for the privilege. Now, almost eight months on from the timetable debacle, I discover that Batley station is ranked in the bottom 15 in the whole nation for performance. Over the last six months—bear in mind that Batley is a small station—459 services have been cancelled. Less than 10% of services overall have been on time.

Underpinning all of this is the infrastructure, which is sadly lacking. Detailed plans for the long-promised electrification of the trans-Pennine route remain as elusive as ever. When I inquired earlier this year, the Secretary of State refused to tell me whether the whole route would be electrified. Perhaps the Minister can venture a response. Although I welcome the much-vaunted introduction of new rolling stock to our network—which, incidentally, has been delayed until next spring—given the existing infrastructure, I fear it will have little effect on reliability.
of local businesses, such as PPG and Batley Bulldogs. Volunteers, however, cannot give us a better service. We desperately need long-term strategic investment.

The latest analysis by IPPR North shows that transport spending has risen twice as much per person in London as in the north since the launch of the northern powerhouse. Last year alone, public spending on transport in London was three times higher than in Yorkshire and Humber. The so-called enhancement package of £15 million to be used across the north, which was announced by the Government last month, amounts to little more than a drop in the ocean. That is unacceptable and indicative of the chronic under-investment in the north.

Where do we go from here? Transport for the North’s strategic transport plan, which includes plans for Northern Powerhouse Rail, has some exciting and potentially transformative proposals, but I feel that more work needs to be done to ensure that towns feel the benefits, along with cities. That plan will of course need the Government’s backing to become reality. We were promised an interconnected northern powerhouse, yet it remains a challenge to get from one town to the next. Franchisees, such as TransPennine and Northern, have serious questions to answer, but the buck stops with the Government and, ultimately, with the Secretary of State for Transport.

The Minister will no doubt repeat the “record investment in transport” mantra, while failing to note that the lion’s share of investment has gone to projects in the south. Will the Minister tell me when exactly the people of Batley and Spen will see significant investment in the rail services on which they rely? My constituents are sick and tired of feeling like second-class citizens, and deserve clear answers on an issue that will have a deep and long-lasting impact on our community.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Thank you. We will now move on to the Front-Bench speeches. I call Rachael Maskell.

10.29 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Dame Cheryl; it is a pleasure to see you in the Chair—you have heard the sheer anger of our constituents about the state of our railways. Today’s debate could have been called, “Why we desperately need an alternative to the problems much of the debate has been very constructive. Would that not be a better way forward?”

Rachael Maskell: The reality is that the Government are not interested in the detailed solutions that we have been working towards for eight years to put the railway system back together, working across the industry with all stakeholders. That is why we need to move forward. If the Government want to join us in that, we would welcome that conversation, but to date they have blocked us. There is a real difference in policy. I note what the hon. Gentleman says, but also what my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford South (Judith Cummins) says. We need to look at the penalties that should be place on these rail companies, such as freezing fares where there has been rail failure. It is wrong that people pay more for more failure on the railways.

The reality is that the Government have failed. Their ideology that is driving this forward is falling apart. Under the new model of publicly owned railways that we will put in place, we will see long-term security, long-term planning, long-term investment and stability for the whole rail sector.

We know about the inequality. We have heard the statistic about how London and the south-east have had so much more investment than we have in Yorkshire. There are consequences when we do not see the resources there. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield) said, let us think about the vitality of connecting Sheffield to Leeds and Manchester—connecting the major cities of the north. In fact, the connectivity between Leeds and Manchester is the same length as the Piccadilly line. Think about the frequency and the reliability of the Piccadilly line compared with what we see at the moment.

We have heard tales of woe from across the trans-Pennine route. We have had a downgrade of the downgrade that was already planned—that came out of the board meeting a week or so ago. That downgrade will have serious consequences, because the Government have removed vital reliability from the service. Not only have we lost freight elements, as my hon. Friends have mentioned, and journey time savings—my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) highlighted how journey times will extend with more stops on the line—but we have lost the reliability factor. That means that the only marker that will have an upgrade is capacity, because there are larger trains. Even then, we will not reach the potential on that line.

Dirty diesel is being put on the route as opposed to full electrification—the only thing that will deliver the reliability that is required. We have heard that this is all part of a stepped process: in control period 6 we will see some of the upgrade, and it will be completed in CP7. Will the Minister tell us what certainty there is that in more than 10 years’ time—we must remember that timeline, because we need connectivity today—CP7 will bring about that full upgrade of the trans-Pennine route? That is the crucial route for the north and we need the upgrade now.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North highlighted the appalling state of stations. We must remember that stations are places of service—they are where people wait and they need facilities. Public
toilets are a basic public health necessity and they must be there to meet passenger needs. We need to make sure they are put in place. We also need to make sure that our stations are accessible. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Batley and Spen about the situation in Kirklees, where only eight of 16 stations are accessible. We have heard about Marsden station from my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker), and about Mirfield station. I was with Leonard Cheshire just last week at York station—even there, there was only one information point in the whole station. If a passenger is in need, where do they go? It is unacceptable.

We heard about the Equality Act 2010, but we must remember that it has been 23 years since the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, which called on stations to make reasonable adjustments. Quite clearly, that is shameful. We are nearly a quarter of a century on and we still deny disabled people the right to access railways. It is not just physical adaptations that are needed; we need to change the environments to accommodate neuro diversity. I suggest that the Minister talks to the TSSA, which is a leader in this field, about how we can accommodate autism and other such things, and make sure that our stations are supportive of people with sensory impairments.

Let me give the Minister a gentle reminder: guards are on trains not just to close doors, which is vital for passenger safety, but as the passenger champion to make sure passengers are safe—whether disabled or non-disabled—throughout their whole journey. It is vital that the Government get to grips with this agenda and ensure that passengers are looked after, as it is a public service, and that guards are back on our trains. It is an easy dispute to resolve, yet the Government seem so entrenched in their ideology that they do not want to move forward on this issue.

Our new model of public ownership will have the passenger at its heart. We will make sure that we take decisions in an integrated way, closer to where the passengers are, that power and resource are in the right place, and that we plan for the long term. We have a 30-year lifetime of infrastructure and rolling stock to make proper investments, to make sure there is a smoothing of skills, and to ensure good employability across the industry. Whether with operations, maintenance or enhancements, we will make sure that we timetable in such a way as to sustain our railway, so it does not fail passengers.

We want real investment in new technologies. It is heartbreaking that we go back to old technologies on our railway systems, because we see such advances taking place elsewhere in Europe and in the world. Yet in the UK, we are still stuck on Victorian railways. We have to move that agenda forward, because that will deliver the reliability that our passengers need and demand from this Government.

We have great opportunities ahead of us; we have heard Northern Powerhouse Rail mentioned. That will get the vital connectivity into Bradford if we have anything to do with it. We will make sure that the north is properly connected and has that modal shift where people move from road to rail—not just passengers, but freight. We have a real crisis with our environmental and carbon footprint. We have to see a modal shift. That will bring about the connectivity that hon. Friends talked about with bus services, making sure the whole system works together. We have the National College for High Speed Rail in Doncaster. I urge employers to make the best use of that academy as we move forward.

Finally, I want to talk about the franchising system. There is recognition that the whole system is broken. The train operating companies are self-serving; they have not provided the essential public service that, perhaps, was envisaged in the beginning; and they are certainly now orientated on profit. Rather than go through the franchising process, the Government have created 12 direct awards, and we clearly need to move on. We need real integration and Labour’s policies will be a catalyst to providing that essential connectivity for the sake of our economy and our environment, and to ensuring that people’s lives are restored and put back in order.

Paula Sherriff: If that is the case, and if the Minister recognises the impact that the chaos had on people’s lives, why is he allowing the fare increase from January?

Andrew Jones: I will come on to talk about fares and plans for the future, but let me focus on some of the points raised today. A number of colleagues raised a point about disabled access. As we know, our rail transport infrastructure is primarily Victorian. Successive Governments have run an Access for All investment programme, and that has continued, including a £300 million extension in the next control period. We published our inclusive transport strategy last July, which for the first time included work on hidden disabilities. As colleagues may remember, I was in the Department for Transport a couple of years ago, and we had our first ever conference on mental health and transport. That was a significant moment—I was pleased that we went calling as it attracted so much attention. Work on making our transport system more accessible and easier to use for people with disabilities, including hidden disabilities, is central, and I am sure no hon. Member here would disagree with that.

One underlying point has been that the quality of rail performance in the north has been unacceptable. That is correct; it is clearly the case. Following the May timetable change we had a very difficult summer on our railways, but lessons have been learned, especially in
regard to future timetable changes, which we have already started to implement. A timetable change on 9 December landed significantly better than the changes in May, and I will expand on that shortly.

The problems in May had a number of causes, including the impact of engineering works. Long delays to the two electrification schemes in the north-west impacted on Northern, which had planned for those schemes to be completed, but they were not. It then had to completely re-plan its timetable in less than half the normal time, together with associated staff training and changes. However, we have made some headway on that. A change on the scale of that in May was, quite frankly, coupled with insufficient time for planning, which of course impacted on passengers. It was a complete failure right across the industry. That is why we set up a full inquiry into those timetable changes, chaired by the independent regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, under Professor Stephen Glaister. He has published interim reports, with a final report published just a few days ago, and the Department are reviewing its recommendations. As I said earlier, lessons from that incident must be learned, and the impact on passengers must be placed at the centre of every planning decision.

Thelma Walker: In a former life I was a headteacher, and I used to work out the timetable in the summer term to set out where the children would be and with which teacher. I never had classes with no teacher in September because I thought strategically. Who is responsible for the chaos that happened under this timetable? As a former headteacher I would have taken responsibility if I ended up with two classes and no teacher, or just one teacher. Who is responsible?

Andrew Jones: As the hon. Lady knows, we have a system in which individual rail companies and the regulator have collective responsibility for these things, and that is what failed.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I have given way a lot, and I have a lot to get through if I am to get to the answers. I will make a bit more progress before I take more interventions.

The May timetable change was a significant problem caused by ambition not being followed through with sufficient time to implement it properly—that obviously did not happen in the school of the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Thelma Walker). In September we appointed Richard George, a respected industry figure, to co-ordinate and lead efforts by the operators and Network Rail to look at performance across the north. He is reviewing the performance of the region’s rail network and making recommendations to improve reliability. His focus will be on operational improvement in the short and medium term.

Mr George is an independent expert, and he will act on behalf of railway customers to assist organisations in delivering organisational improvements. He will have a facilitation role in helping industry to reach the right decisions and focus on improving passenger services. He has already helped to highlight particular problem areas, and he will provide his conclusions in the new year. In the meantime, Network Rail has established a programme management office, so as to prepare better and to improve management of future timetable changes. An early recommendation from Network Rail was that it would be prudent for most of the changes planned for December 2018—including those in the north—to be deferred until May 2019. As colleagues have noted, we accepted that recommendation.

The modest changes that took place on 9 December were designed to improve performance, especially that of TransPennine Express through Yorkshire. I am pleased to report that the results in the first week—I recognise that these are early days—were encouraging, with TPE’s punctuality for the first few days 15% higher than the equivalent period in the previous week.

Several Members mentioned the compensation offered for the problems in May, and we took early action to ensure that passengers were compensated for the disruption they experienced. Not everybody was disrupted, but there was disruption in many parts of the country, not just the north, and those who were delayed significantly were able to reclaim money under the delay repay scheme. We required Northern and TPE to establish compensation schemes targeted at the people affected. That meant that the compensation was more generous, and money was put back into passengers’ pockets more quickly. More than 14,000 claims from season ticket holders and regular travellers on Northern and TPE services have been submitted, and £1 million has been paid in compensation to date. This week the delay repay scheme was extended to cover delays of 15 minutes. That focuses on helping people to seek redress if something goes wrong, but our focus now is on improving reliability and the operational performance of the railways, so that we do not need such compensation schemes.

Industrial relations were raised, and that issue is having a significant impact on the economy right across the north of England, not just in Yorkshire. In an effort to break the deadlock, leaders from Transport for the North and I recently made clear a shared desire to have a second person on board Northern trains, not just on the platform. As I have said, if we need to change the franchise contract, I will not block that in any way. Indeed, we will go further and play our part in helping to develop a funding package to cover any financial implications from such a change. In looking at the dispute, I see that Northern and the Department for Transport have confirmed that individual jobs are secure and pay is secure right up to the end of the franchise. There can be change with respect to having people on trains. All those changes are what people who travel on the networks are looking for. In view of that, I call on the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers to suspend the strikes and get talking again. I want the company and the union to sit and talk, and to bring things to a conclusion.

The Williams review is a significant piece of work. It is a root and branch review of the rail industry, led by the independent Keith Williams. We are seeking ambitious recommendations for reform that will ensure that the rail network delivers greater benefits for passengers. The investment from the Government and the private sector must result in improvements for passengers, to provide better capacity, better trains and more frequent services.

Tracy Brabin: I am really looking forward to reading the Williams review. Will it cover disabled access from stations?

Andrew Jones: Passengers are at the heart of it. The point is for customers to be at the heart of the rail network, which of course includes such access, but I do
not think that there will be any debate in that area. We all want there to be improved access. The points that the hon. Lady made earlier, so I do not need to address it.

The Williams review is important in making sure the rail network is fit for the future. We have had huge success within the rail industry in the past 20 years, with the number of passengers more than doubling. Each year 1 billion extra passenger journeys are taken. However, we must ask ourselves whether the network is structured for the future, to allow for growth.

John Grogan: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: Yes—although I am going to run out of time.

John Grogan: On the question of future growth, will the Minister agree to a meeting in January with one or two Members who are interested in Boxing day trains for 2019?

Andrew Jones: I am always available for colleagues and am happy to arrange meetings. I know that engineering work is going on around the Christmas period this year, and I shall be going to see it. That is affecting the possibility of running Boxing day trains this year; but let us look to the future. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

We shall shortly run out of time for debate, and I want to spend a moment looking ahead. I gently remind colleagues who talk about a lack of investment in the north that although I have some sympathy as to investment, a little caution is required in taking snapshots of figures. The figures for London reflect Crossrail, but analysis of the Infrastructure and Projects Authority figures for planned central Government spending on transport infrastructure in the four-year period we are now in—from 2017 to 2020—shows that the northern regions will have a higher spend than the southern ones.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: I am going to run out of time in a minute.

Lilian Greenwood: On that point, please.

Andrew Jones: My goodness—go on then.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank the Minister for giving way. The point is important, because he talks about the northern regions, but this debate is about Yorkshire. As I said earlier, Yorkshire and Humber is set to receive the lowest level of spending of any region, according to his figures, at £726 per head compared with £1,026 in London and £1,139 in the south-east. It is much less than the spending in the north-west and west midlands, which will alter the figures. Yorkshire and Humber is losing out.

Andrew Jones: That was a repetition of the point that the hon. Lady made earlier, so I do not need to address it. I gently remind. Members that we had a zero-growth franchise, which was put in place by the Labour party, and we are playing catch-up on under-investment. Labour Members may say that Labour invested steadily when it was in government, but the evidence is the exact opposite. We had a zero-growth franchise and are catching up from it. Let me consider what that catch-up might look like.

Although 2018 is clearly a year that passengers in the north would wish to forget, we should not overlook the fact that train services in the region will be changing fundamentally. A significant amount of investment will bring passenger benefits. On the infrastructure side, the electrification between Manchester and Preston, which I mentioned earlier, was finally energised last week and the first test trains are now operational. [Interruption.] It will benefit services across the north. That is my point. Electric passenger services will be phased in during the spring. Across the region platform lengthening is under way. Of course I recognise that performance is not good enough, and that is why we have made a change in the control period 6 budgets and priorities. Under CP6 there will be a budget of £48 billion. That covers the period from 2019 to 2024. The priority was moving away from enhancements to catching up on core reliability—the maintenance of the network.

Rachael Maskell: Will the Minister address the issue of the trans-Pennine route and the fact that reliability has now been taken off the table as part of the CP6 upgrade? It is vital that it should be put back on the table, to ensure that we get the connectivity that we need between Manchester and Leeds.

Andrew Jones: If I get time I shall come on to the trans-Pennine upgrades, but the core purpose of the CP6 investment, which is a record from any Government in British history, is to increase reliability and punctuality.

The key thing that passengers will notice is new trains. New rolling stock will come in on Northern, TransPennine Express and London North Eastern Railway networks in the coming months, including the removal of Pacers by the end of 2019. By this time next year the vast majority of the 500 brand new carriages committed by Northern and TPE will have been delivered, and the remainder will have been completely refurbished. TPE will have introduced its new Nova trains on the north trans-Pennine route and all the Pacers will be gone from Northern. There will be more services to add to those already delivered, especially at weekends; there will also be later last trains in the evenings and earlier first trains on Sundays. Elsewhere, LNER will begin introducing its new Azuma trains next year.

The trans-Pennine upgrade is a huge Government initiative—a £2.9 billion upgrade covering York to Leeds and Manchester. It is one third of the expected rail upgrade investment in the next control period, so it is a significant point. By the way, freight has been mentioned, and it is of course still under our consideration for northern trans-Pennine.

Lilian Greenwood: Will the Minister give way?

Andrew Jones: No, because I am running out of time. I have 50 seconds left.

We have a trans-Pennine upgrade that is bigger than anything ever considered or delivered by Labour. We are delivering it for the north in a way that has never been considered before.
Northern Powerhouse Rail, which some have called Crossrail for the north, is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The scheme is being developed for the north by the north—by Transport for the North—and the Government have given a budget to help it to do that. Crossrail in London was mentioned as if money were piling into it. The money that has gone into Crossrail was, of course, a loan. Transport for London needed that loan to help it deliver the project. It was not a grant.

Of course, it is fair to say that rail services across Yorkshire and the north as a whole have not been good enough. That is entirely understood, but I want to leave colleagues in no doubt that we recognise the importance of the Yorkshire rail network and that steps are being taken to improve it. More than that, I hope that in a year’s time passengers will be able to experience the change as investment comes on stream, and the benefits of the Yorkshire rail network and that steps are being taken to improve it. More than that, I hope that in a year’s time passengers will be able to experience the change as investment comes on stream, and the benefits to match our vision for a 21st century railway in Yorkshire.

10.58 pm

Paula Sherriff: I am incredibly disappointed by the Minister’s response. He did not respond to a number of points. Once again it seems that sorry is the hardest word. He can be in no doubt—he must have heard loud and clear—that things need to improve and must improve. [Interruption.] He is chuntering from a sedentary position. I am not sure what he said, but I sincerely hope that we shall not be here again in six months reporting on a lack of progress, or further deterioration. Yorkshire towns and cities will no longer tolerate being second best, and I hope that he has heard that.

I am grateful to all the hon. Members who took part today, including the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevan Hollinrake). I am sorry to single him out, but there are 17 Tory MPs in Yorkshire. Where are they? One has turned up today—and the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak) has turned up in the past minute. It is not good enough. Does that mean that rail services in the rest of Yorkshire, represented by Conservative MPs, are fantastic? [Interruption.] Well, not all of them—where are the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies), and the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns)? The Minister has heard the stories of human suffering and misery, social mobility, mental health and life chances. My constituents and others in Yorkshire deserve better.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
not providing weekly demand for the post office, bus service, pub, church or village store. When second home ownership gets to a critical level, the absence of a permanent population begins to have tangible consequences. Schools in places such as Satterthwaite, Lowick and Heversham have closed because there was not a year-round population big enough to sustain them. Several of my schools today have fewer than 30 pupils. They are brilliant schools, but every time a house in the village is sold to a second home owner, they see their future becoming a little bleaker.

Bus services have been pared back out of season in the Lakes and the Cartmel peninsula for the very same reasons. The village store in Backbarrow closed 18 months ago and awaits a new buyer as the number of full-time residents in that village continues to dwindle. With not enough kids going to local schools, not enough people visiting the local shops and not enough people using the local bus service, it all means that those services end up becoming non-viable and that beautiful places can become empty places, with communities struggling to survive.

Over the weekend, I visited a small hamlet in the Lakes—I will not name it—where there are a dozen houses, precisely half of which are second homes. All the residents of the remaining six properties are pensioners and, as it happens, are under serious threat from their private landlord, who is contemplating evicting them to sell the houses as holiday homes. I am dealing with that matter separately, but even as things stand, each of those residents fears being the last one left as their community dwindles away. A few weeks previously, I met an older gentleman in the Rusland valley who exemplified their fears. He was the last permanent resident of his small hamlet. The only people he ever saw were the people who came and went, renting the homes in his neighbourhood; I would not exactly call them neighbours. He was isolated and, frankly, deeply unhappy.

Last week I made an early-morning visit to the Troutbeck Bridge Royal Mail sorting office, to thank the team for their immense work in the run-up to Christmas. While I was there, the manager of the sorting office told me of an older lady who had been found by the postie, 18 hours after she had had a fall. The settlement near Ambleside where she lived was almost entirely second homes and she was the only full-time resident. She no longer had any neighbours, and in this extreme case that could have cost her her life.

The Government have talked a lot in recent times about loneliness. It is something we are all the more conscious of as a society as Christmas approaches, when the absence of community and family are felt so acutely. Despite their loneliness agenda, the Government have so far done nothing to address the fact that second home ownership is leaving vulnerable people in the shells of once-thriving communities. Those are homes that should be lived in, not just maintained.

The problem affects larger communities too; I could list countless other examples in communities such as Hawkshead, Coniston, Grasmere and Dent, each with around 50% of its properties not lived in all year round. Then we have Elterwater, with a staggering 85% of its properties owned by those who are absent for most of the year. Hon. Members will be unsurprised to hear that Elterwater’s post office closed a few years ago.

It is no surprise that the loss of vital services so often follows the loss of a permanent population. To put it bluntly, excessive second home ownership kills villages. We are a resilient and proud people in Cumbria, working hard to make our own luck. I think of the community-run shop in Witherslack, the community-run post office in Storith and the affordable housing groups in Coniston and Grasmere—all proof that local people are determined to fight against the tide and keep our communities alive and thriving. It feels to me that this is another of those issues that the Government overlook because they have taken their eye off the ball, trapped in the dark forest of Brexit and incapable of focusing on the day-to-day challenges that our country faces.

I am determined to give our communities the best chance to defeat the threat of second home ownership and I am here to tell the Minister that this is a problem that can be solved. The good news is that there is a clear set of actions that the Government could take if they wanted to, to breathe life back into our communities—three actions in particular. First, they could close the business rates loophole that incentivises even greater levels of absentee second home ownership. At the moment, some second home owners are avoiding local taxation altogether. They claim their second homes are let for holiday accommodation, but then make no real effort to let them out at all. As a result, they can bring the homes within the business rates system, instead of paying council tax on them. However, because their “business” will have an income of less than £12,000 a year, it will qualify for small business rate relief, and therefore no council tax or business rates will be paid at all, so no contribution whatsoever will be made to local services. This, frankly, is a scam, and one that hurts communities like mine.

I commend the Government for launching a consultation on tackling this loophole, but it seems to me that they could take action now, and that the action they need to take is pretty obvious. The Government should bring the law in England into line with that in Wales, where an owner needs to prove that their property has been let for a minimum of 70 days per year in order to qualify as a business. At a stroke this would mean that thousands of second homes would be brought into paying tax and contributing towards the local communities that they damage by their absence.

Secondly, the Government could give local authorities the power to levy higher council tax on second homes. Earlier this year, the Government announced that they are introducing provisions to allow local authorities to triple the council tax on homes left empty for five to 10 years, and to quadruple it on those empty for more than a decade. That is a welcome move, but it raises the question of why the Government have not extended those powers to second homes. If they were to do so, councils could choose to set a higher rate of council tax on second homes in those places where there is a threat to the sustainability of the local community.

Closing the business rates loophole and allowing local authorities to increase council tax on second homes would have some impact in dissuading people from buying second homes in those towns and villages that are most under threat. I suspect that someone who can afford at least £500,000 for a second home will not be put off by another £2,000 or £3,000 a year in council tax, but the key purpose of these moves would be to
secure additional funds, to be used to provide compensatory subsidies to schools, post offices and bus routes suffering from the lack of a permanent population, and to pump-prime new affordable housing developments for local families, to give those communities a fighting chance of reviving and surviving.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing the debate. He puts forward worthwhile suggestions on how to sustain local villages. However, loneliness is also an issue, as he referred to. Does he feel that church groups and organisations can play a key role in sustaining those people who live on their own in small, dispersed communities? Does he feel that, along with sustainability, the Government should also address loneliness and the role that churches can play?

Tim Farron: I think that churches play a big role in communities, and not only in that they are often physically present and can be the last thing that survives as a community centre in a village whose permanent population is contracting. The challenge to Christians is to look out for those lonely people in need. A church is more than just a building, as the hon. Gentleman knows.

Across South Lakeland, average house prices are 10 times average household incomes, and in some villages it is 20 times. I am determined that local families in Cumbria should be able to live and to make a living in the communities that they grew up in. The new homes that could be built by those additional funds could make a vast difference to thousands of local people. In the last few years, South Lakeland District Council has enabled the building of 1,200 new affordable homes for local families in places like Grasmere, Ambleside, Hawkshead, Sedbergh, Windermere and Coniston. I get letters from residents in those communities who are the polar opposite of nimbys: “In my back yard, please” say so many people throughout our area who want their village to survive and thrive.

Thirdly, although taxation measures will make a difference, the Government should act on planning law. Second homes should be made a separate category of planning use. If I wanted to change my home into a chip shop, my kids would be utterly delighted but I would have to apply for planning permission for change of use. However, if I wanted to sell my home to someone who would use it as a bolthole for four or five weekends a year, I could do so freely, yet in a very real sense the use of that home would have substantially changed.

To turn a first home into a second home should require planning permission from the local council or the national park, and I would expect planners to say a flat no to such applications in one of the many communities already under the greatest threat and pressure from excessive second home ownership. By taking this action, the Government could enable an immediate cap on second home ownership and would, over time, allow second homes to move back into being permanent family homes, rebuilding, reviving and renewing our communities.

One feature of representing an awesome place is that the problems we face can often be disguised—easy to miss at first glance as we are blinded by the glory. The blight of excessive second home ownership is one such example. It is a blight that I want the Government to tackle today. I want you, Dame Cheryl, and the Minister to come on holiday to the lakes and the dales, to enjoy Cumbria and to know that you are welcome. The Minister of course does not need inviting to the dales, but he will get my point.

I do not want any second home owner out there to think that I am having a personal go at them. I am not. However, my job is to fight for our communities so that they can remain awesome. I ask the Minister to do those three things without delay, to help us to keep them so.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind invitation.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rishi Sunak): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl. I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing the debate. He is my constituency neighbour, and I know that it is often difficult for him to live in the shadow of beautiful North Yorkshire. However, he did a commendable job of explaining how his constituency plays a good second to North Yorkshire, and I pay tribute to him for that.

The hon. Gentleman has raised second home ownership regularly, both with me and in the House. His passion for and knowledge of the subject is well known and was firmly on display this morning. Second home ownership is a particular concern for his constituents, who live in an authority that ranks seventh in England in terms of the proportion of second homes. He knows that I have a local familiarity with concerns about second home ownership, with a particularly high prevalence of it in the Yorkshire Dales national park.

Residents living in areas where second homes constitute a significant proportion of the housing market can find themselves facing a particular set of challenges. Some believe that second home ownership exerts pressure on the affordability and availability of housing for local residents. It is also perceived to present a hurdle for aspiring first-time buyers looking to put down roots in their home community. Furthermore, vacant second homes can have an adverse impact on community cohesion and the long-term viability of local services and amenities.

However, we must not lose sight of the benefits that second home ownership can bring, or the possible diverse reasons for purchasing a second property. Second homes can boost local economies and tourism and provide employment opportunities, while also encouraging regeneration. In some cases, individuals may not use local services for parts of the year but will continue to contribute to their upkeep through the payment of council tax, freeing up local resources to benefit the local community. The Government are not in the business of being directive when it comes to an individual’s choice of where to purchase property.

There may be various reasons for second home ownership. Although second homes and holiday homes are often conflated, second homes may be properties in use to enable an individual to access employment in the local area. That said, the Government recognise that second home ownership can present various challenges, which is why we have taken various steps to mitigate
they. I would like to spend some time outlining those and address the hon. Gentleman's specific points as well.

The first issue is the second home council tax discount. Under the coalition Government, working in partnership with the hon. Gentleman's party, we empowered authorities to vary or remove entirely the second home council tax discount, in the light of local circumstances. Local authorities have made extensive use of that change: 94% of second homes no longer receive any discount, and that is the highest proportion in the past five years.

The second step was the empty homes premium. Under the coalition Government, we also worked with the hon. Gentleman's party to introduce a discretionary empty homes premium of 50% on properties that have been empty and substantially unfurnished for two years or more. This year, 299 out of 326 billing authorities charged a premium on almost 62,000 empty homes. We recently took that further, with cross-party support to put in place legislation to enable a 100% council tax premium to apply when a property has been left empty for more than two years, and for higher premiums for longer timeframes. I am sure that that will be another valuable tool for authorities to use in addressing their local housing market, including empty second homes.

**Tim Farron:** I apologise for interrupting; I am very grateful for what the Minister has said. Will he acknowledge this point? I can tell him that in a constituency such as mine, the number of empty homes is in the hundreds and the number of second homes is in the thousands. Surely, therefore, the action needs to be taken at least as much on the latter as on the former.

**Rishi Sunak:** I very much take the hon. Gentleman's point, but I point out that I am going through a range of measures and that in different parts of the country second homes and empty homes can actually be conflated. London, for example, is a slightly different case, as he will know, and I appreciate that in Cumbria and my constituency it is not necessarily the case. However, what I referred to is part of the toolkit that local authorities can use to tackle this particular issue, and it demonstrates the Government's progress in the general area of ensuring that homes are available for those who need them in the areas that they want to live in.

The third step along the path was to tackle the issue of holiday homes and business rates. Second homes are not the same as holiday lets, but in some circumstances a second property is purchased as holiday-let accommodation and, in the case of holiday-let accommodation, properties are assessed for business rates, rather than council tax, if they are available for short-term lets for 140 days or more per financial year. Any property registered for business rates may qualify for short-term lets for 140 days or more per financial year. This year, 299 out of 326 billing authorities charged a premium on almost 62,000 empty homes. We recently took that further, with cross-party support to put in place legislation to enable a 100% council tax premium to apply when a property has been left empty for more than two years, and for higher premiums for longer timeframes. I am sure that that will be another valuable tool for authorities to use in addressing their local housing market, including empty second homes.

**Rishi Sunak:** I very much take the hon. Gentleman's point, but I point out that I am going through a range of measures and that in different parts of the country second homes and empty homes can actually be conflated. London, for example, is a slightly different case, as he will know, and I appreciate that in Cumbria and my constituency it is not necessarily the case. However, what I referred to is part of the toolkit that local authorities can use to tackle this particular issue, and it demonstrates the Government's progress in the general area of ensuring that homes are available for those who need them in the areas that they want to live in.

The fourth measure to tackle the problem that we are discussing involves stamp duty. Moving beyond council tax, the Government have raised stamp duty rates for those buying additional homes. Since April 2016, anyone purchasing a second home has paid a stamp duty charge three percentage points above current rates. There were more than 300,000 first-time buyers in the past financial year alone; that is an increase of more than 5% on the year before.

**Tim Farron:** The Minister is being generous with his time. I acknowledge that what he refers to is an important and welcome move by the Government, but of course the money raised goes to the Exchequer. The communities that suffer as a result of this issue are the local communities. At the same time, they have seen a 40% reduction in local government funding. Therefore, if we are taxing—however we do it—those who are fortunate enough to have a second home, surely the money should be spent in the communities that suffer.

**Rishi Sunak:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, and actually the next thing that I will talk about from the toolkit of things that the Government are doing is community housing plans and how the Government are directing the centrally raised money specifically into communities, such as his and mine, that have a high prevalence of second homes. But before we get on to those details, I will finish on stamp duty. It is worth noting the other significant support for first-time buyers in the form of the total removal of the need to pay stamp duty on homes worth up to £300,000. That will benefit many people in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. The Government will also consult in January on a new stamp duty land tax surcharge of 1% on non-residents buying residential property in England and Northern Ireland, to help to control house price growth and so help to ensure that residents of the UK can get on the housing ladder.

As the hon. Gentleman said, money should be channelled back into local communities, and I am pleased to tell him that that is exactly what is happening. The Government's community housing fund has allocated part of the additional revenue raised from the higher stamp duty rates to areas with the potential to deliver
community-led housing. That specifically includes areas, such as his and mine, with high rates of second home ownership. The community housing fund will make £163 million available across England between April 2018 and March 2020, and has already provided funding for numerous schemes since 2016. I think that this addresses the hon. Gentleman’s idea of a council tax premium to generate funds. This is already happening in his own constituency: £2.36 million has been allocated to South Lakeland District Council in the first year of the scheme, in recognition of its position as one of the authorities with the highest density of second homes and most affected by issues of local affordability. The money included £90,000 towards sheltered housing in Windermere, funding for the Helsington Community Land Trust to provide additional homes in Brigsteer, and salary funding for a community-led housing officer post. I am sure that those schemes will be warmly welcomed by the hon. Gentleman and others across South Lakeland, and I look forward to seeing how the local authority plans to use the remaining grant that it has to support further such schemes.

The final issue is neighbourhood planning. The planning system now enables local residents to put in place neighbourhood plans that manage second home ownership—notable is the one in St Ives. It is right that local residents should have the opportunity to express their views on the design of their areas, including the second home ownership of new builds, and ultimately to approve neighbourhood plans via a referendum. I am pleased to say that more than 700 such plans, including a number across the wider Lake district, are now in force.

I want to touch on the hon. Gentleman’s point about planning. I hope that he will forgive me: as I am not responsible for planning policy, I cannot answer him directly, but I spoke this morning to my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing, who is responsible for planning and who is looking forward to his meeting with the hon. Gentleman. I hope that the hon. Gentleman can raise that particular issue with my hon. Friend. I am aware that the current case law around planning says that decisions on planning applications can be made only on the basis of a land use planning consideration. It is not clear that case law says that a switch from a primary home to a second home constitutes such a change, but the hon. Gentleman can discuss that with my hon. Friend.

To conclude, I am sympathetic to the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman. He makes a powerful case in representing his constituents and highlighting second home ownership constructively and positively. Although it is important to recognise that second home ownership can take different forms and deliver benefits, the Government recognise the potential issues faced by communities with a high proportion of second homes. That is why the Government have put in place the wide-ranging measures that I have set out. I hope that the hon. Gentleman agrees that although the dynamics of individual choice and local housing markets are complex and best addressed at local level, the Government have been proactive over the past few years and, indeed, very recently in playing our part to help to address the issues. I look forward to continuing the conversation on this issue with the hon. Gentleman, his colleagues and others and with local authorities and communities so that we are doing everything we can to ensure that our local communities remain thriving, vibrant places that we are all proud to call home.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am
Sitting suspended.
From the front door of my constituency office, I can tell I am in Longton. It has the characteristic view of high Victorian architecture, rich in ornamental features and details—some Italianate, some partly gothic—and lots of traditional red brick and tiles, as is common in the Potteries, with window placements of carved stone. It is a mix that says: Longton, the Potteries and Stoke-on-Trent. However, the view from the back door of my office is of a carpark and a modern retail shed, which could be pretty much anywhere in Europe. It is not distinctive—same new, same new.

If we are going to attract more visitors, more shoppers and more businesses, we need to do better at presenting our uniqueness, which can only come from those integral historical features. Our local tourism appeal will never come from looking like everywhere else in the world; it must be in looking like Longton and the Potteries—the home of bottle ovens and pottery works. That is one of the key paradoxes of globalisation: when people can go anywhere in the world, their preference is to see places that are like nowhere else on earth. Celebrating, preserving and enhancing our local distinctiveness is fundamental to our sense of place, sense of destination and sense of identity. It is fundamental to the sense of local pride that we have something special to offer the world.

With suitable heritage interventions, Longton has the potential to be a thriving commercial centre for the south of Stoke-on-Trent. There are 224 outlets within the town centre and a total of 65,000 square feet of floor space, about one fifth of which is, unfortunately, vacant. That is substantially higher than the regional average of 12.1%. The residential population within a 2.5 km radius of Longton is more than 80,000, but very few people live in the centre itself. One of the key objectives of the HAZ, therefore, is to focus on housing within the key urban conservation area, restoring heritage buildings creatively for residential use in the high street and getting more people living in our town centres above shops once again. Often, this means reinstating shopfronts that are more in keeping with the local architectural style and restoring access to flats above shops that have long since fallen out of use.

As in many town centres, the lack of occupation has been one of the key inhibitors to maintaining heritage buildings. Thankfully, urban living is back in vogue, particularly in quirky buildings, but modern expectations for communications, plumbing, insulation and so on will need to be met. The private rental sector outside the HAZ area is already relatively strong, with many renters paying monthly rent of twice what a mortgage repayment on the same property would cost. However, much of that is old terraced housing, and there is a singular lack of private rented apartments. There is a market yet to be made.

It often proves exceptionally difficult to get property owners to convert properties in town centres to residential use. Where there is a market for residential conversions, the up-front cost of converting much of the stock available can prove, in a low-value market, to be considerably more than the post-conversion values. There has been an unwillingness in the private sector to take the necessary risks where the market is untested and lower value; and therefore market-making measures are needed to de-risk development and incentivise conversions. That has been provided in part by the housing infrastructure fund, but further investment in road and rail links to potential...
housing sites would always be welcome. I was especially pleased to see the Government announce the future high streets fund as part of the recent Budget. That could offer financial support in helping to address the viability gap in converting historic town centre properties into alternative uses.

It was also fantastic to have my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry), the Minister with responsibility for high streets, visit my constituency recently, to see for himself and speak to local retailers about the challenges faced in our town centres. The HAZ can play its part by getting the town joined up in the ambition to move forward. However, alongside it we need incentives to address market challenges and viability constraints, and I hope the future high streets fund can provide those. A clear plan of action to increase residency, new businesses and footfall in our town centres can stimulate and leverage the increased private investment that our property market needs.

Improvements are also needed to the local public realm. Longton’s public transport network and the sense of liveability and visitability that a prospering urban centre needs to improve. It is not just about regenerating the high street in Longton; two town squares—Times Square and Union Square—do not function as visitable destinations at the moment and need improving. Dominating Times Square is the imposing Longton town hall building, which dates back to 1863. It is great to see Stoke-on-Trent City Council investing £1.9 million in plans to bring the historic Longton town hall building back into use. The building was saved by the local community from demolition in 1985 and is now, thankfully, grade II* listed. This important building will now provide a hub for the south of the city, to enable people more easily to access services in one place. There will also be investment in the fantastic adjacent Victorian market and improvement to facilities, including new public toilets.

Re-establishing the civic nature of our town squares could also establish a welcoming heritage route for visitors through the town to Gladstone Pottery Museum. Sightlines could also be opened up to the heritage landmarks of St.James the Less church and the Sutherland Institute, which houses Longton library. It would, of course, mean having to improve the local traffic, with better public transport, and I hope that the existence of the HAZ will focus minds on that.

That is particularly pertinent now that we have secured funding for Stoke-on-Trent through the transforming cities fund, as outlined in the Red Book, and I thank the Government for their work on that. Getting the right balance of vehicles and pedestrians will be necessary to make the HAZ a success. I hope that the transforming cities fund will help better to join up our public transport links, and especially to improve bus links, which are severely lacking. There is plenty of capacity for numerous cultural and leisure uses, including niche retail, dining, start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises—private sector investment that can be leveraged if we get the basics of attractive buildings and the public realm right.

I note that in Historic England’s excellent publication, “Heritage and the Economy 2018”, evaluation evidence from the Derby partnership scheme revealed that footfall grew between 12% and 15% in the partnership scheme area while it fell by 26% across the country. I understand that Derby’s partnership scheme involved grants for the sympathetic renovation of historic shop fronts using local tradespeople over an eight-year period. That is the kind of success that Longton traders—key partners in the HAZ—are keen to replicate.

Longton is on the same train line as Derby, and it can easily compete with that city if it draws the right lessons about best practice. We also need to establish better rail services for Longton. That was the focus of my last Westminster Hall debate a few weeks ago, which my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) also contributed to. I am glad that the Department for Transport has taken that message seriously and recognised the huge economic potential for growth in local rail connectivity.

That matters because Stoke-on-Trent is on the up, and we want to keep it that way. It is a city enjoying a modern industrial revolution in its traditional and new industries. It is one of the fastest-growing and best places to start a new business in the UK. Some of our key ceramics manufacturers have grown by more than 50% in the last few years. Heritage buildings in my constituency are once again full, with pottery manufacturing just one of the productive activities taking place there.

We are much more than ceramics, however; we have learned that we have to be. The economy in Stoke-on-Trent is more diverse than ever. Manufacturing is booming in the city and there have been significant advances in hi-tech, digital and research. There is an increasing vibrancy in the wider area, with two growing universities, Keele and Staffordshire, one of which is based right outside Stoke-on-Trent station.

The HAZ has to provide invaluable opportunities for academic research, such as the 3D scanning that has been undertaken of bottle ovens. That fascinating process has underlined the fact that no two bottle ovens are the same. They are all listed, of course, but only as “bottle oven”, because not enough detail has ever been known about them. Most are grade II listed, and at Gladstone Pottery Museum they are grade II* listed. The HAZ has an important role to play in filling the gaps in our city’s collective knowledge about those important historical features.

The city’s living industrial heritage is catalysed by a burgeoning tourist industry, which also has massive potential for growth in Stoke-on-Trent. According to VisitEngland, and backed by Historic England, the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery is the sixth most-visited free attraction in the west midlands in 2016. Visitor numbers increased by more than 25% from 2016 to 2017, to 176,000. The attraction of Stoke-on-Trent to tourists is clearly strengthening and I want to ensure that the south of the city—Longton, Fenton, Meir and Trentham—shares in that success.

As Historic England rightly stressed to local partners, the fundamental purpose of the HAZ is to increase the number of people who come to visit Longton and see and enjoy the heritage that is preserved there by the work of the HAZ. It is important to note that the HAZ is in addition to existing plans for heritage-led regeneration. As the authentic capital of world ceramics, Stoke-on-Trent has much to offer in destination-based tourism and experience-based tourism—for example, there are opportunities to have a go at throwing a pot in the actual potteries.
I look forward to VisitBritain running campaigns to bring international visitors to our area. Many already visit the award-winning World of Wedgwood in my constituency. The percentage of overseas visitors that it attracts is more in line with a London attraction than other sites in the midlands. Bringing those visitors into Longton, with its authentic Potteries skyline, would be great for local traders, who are only too keen to welcome more visitors to the town.

Tourism is not just about overseas visitors. We can do much to support VisitEngland to boost domestic tourism to Longton as the home of the Gladstone Pottery Museum and the largest collection of remaining bottle ovens in the Potteries, as I have said. My first ask to the Minister is this. What communication channels are there between Historic England, VisitEngland and VisitBritain to ensure that the heritage action zones in the regions will be promoted by professional tourism marketers based in London?

Historic England has rightly made it clear that the purpose of Longton’s town centre HAZ is to increase visitor numbers. Will VisitEngland and VisitBritain be primed to help with that? The benefits of UK tourism are overwhelmingly enjoyed by London. I do not begrudge our capital city its success, but I hope that we can have help where it is due to grow our tourism on the back of it.

Sadly, Longton has lost a lot of its bed space. Some hotels were pulled down altogether to make way for retail units that are now empty; others have been converted into office space. Much hotel accommodation was originally provided with travelling merchants in mind, as in most places across the country, and in our case it was linked to the ceramics trade. Staffordshire as a whole has one of the lowest levels of hotel beds per head of population, despite the increasing demand, which means that, amazingly, some hotels now charge London prices.

We are starting to see growth in that market. There are new and expanding hotels in Stoke-on-Trent, such as a Hilton under construction in the city centre as well as the expansion of Premier Inn and a Best Western in Meir Park. I hope that the HAZ will make Longton a more attractive destination for growing business-related markets. We certainly need to stimulate investment from accommodation providers for tourism and business travel.

Down the road in Leek, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), a great example of a heritage building, the Victorian Talbot hotel, is being saved and revived by Premier Inn to suit contemporary demands and expectations for modern hotel accommodation. That demonstrates the potential to convert historic properties to new uses.

If Premier Inn, Travelodge—or Wetherspoon, for that matter—or any of the other modern hospitality companies that sustainably save and revive historical buildings would like a tour around Longton and my constituency, I would be only too delighted to provide them with one. When such properties are empty and up for sale, it is right to be proactive in encouraging potential new owners who might find that the vision of the HAZ conveniently aligns to their existing business model.

I note that tourism is the latest industry to explore a sector deal and that the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport is keen to secure such a deal. Indeed, the Department stipulates that it must focus on accessible destinations with good accommodation, which is precisely what Longton can be if all the work is joined up properly. If we were to achieve a sector deal for ceramics that involved the proposed new international research centre for ceramics, we would need increased availability of accommodation for business travellers.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for meeting me last week to discuss that aspect of the ceramics sector deal and the bid to Arts Council England for investment from the cultural development fund to dramatically improve creative facilities at Staffordshire University. I am glad that he is keen to visit my constituency to see how the various projects supported by his Department can link with the council and local enterprise partnership frameworks to maximise efficiency and impact.

That is a reminder that the HAZ does not exist in a vacuum. It complements other projects and developments in the city, and it needs to knit in with other Government initiatives and the work of national public bodies. For example, the HAZ in Longton could be complemented by attractive partnership work with Network Rail. That is my second ask: can the Minister bring any pressure to bear in cross-governmental tourism forums for Network Rail and train operators to be plugged into the HAZ project?

The iconic girder rail bridge in Longton is a local landmark, and it is as much a part of the sense of place and destination as the impressive town hall and Victorian market opposite. The potential for increased rail and passenger numbers is significant. The railway arches could also house commercial enterprises—as, indeed, they did previously.

Rail needs to play a much bigger role in the future success of our city to get people from place to place locally and to make it more accessible for visitors and tourists, so any support that the Minister can offer for Stoke-on-Trent’s bid for Access for All funding for Longton station and to improve local rail services would be welcome. The platforms at Longton station can only be reached using stairs, which makes access to the HAZ by alternative means of transport especially difficult for people who are less mobile or who have a disability. More generally, improved rail services would significantly encourage more tourists to visit the area, and especially to visit Gladstone Pottery Museum.

As a further ask, can the Minister comment on any possible links between the HAZ projects for preserving heritage buildings and Sir Roger Scruton’s commission on beauty? The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government announced last month that the first aim of the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission is

“To promote better design and style of homes, villages, towns and high streets, to reflect what communities want, building on the knowledge and tradition of what they know works for their area.”

There seems to be an obvious crossover with what we are trying to achieve in Longton. We want to ensure that the buildings of the past, which make up the character of our area, have a future, and that modern design is respectful and complementary, adding to the urban fabric of our communities.

Business improvement districts may also have a role to play in ensuring that there is investment in making our town centres more welcoming environments. A BID
is currently being developed for the city centre. If it is successful, I hope that it will be followed in other town centres across Stoke-on-Trent.

As I have mentioned, there is real potential for the future high streets fund to address the gap in viability of converting some of our historic buildings for future use. I also ask the Minister what opportunities he sees for town centre HAZ schemes to benefit from the future high streets fund announced by the Chancellor in his latest Budget. Where there are issues of viability, it is important that sufficient capital is available to help to incentivise and match fund private investment.

I will also touch on the support that the Heritage Lottery Fund can give through its townscape heritage grants. In 2016, we submitted a bid to HLF for funding and the west midlands HLF committee identified the Longton town centre townscape heritage programme as a high priority. Unfortunately, however, it was rejected at the second round by the HLF townscape heritage decision panel. My understanding is that it was rejected because such funding is allocated on a geographic basis. Since nearby towns had received funding previously, we missed out, no matter how good our bid was.

That cannot be the only justification for the refusal of a high-priority bid. That refusal has meant that the restoration of a number of prominent historic properties within the conservation zone has not been able to go ahead. I ask the Minister to consider closely the criteria for the future awarding of HLF grants, to ensure that Longton and the other towns that make up the Potteries do not miss out on the funding that is needed to restore important historic buildings and bring them back into use. We have a significant number of heritage buildings that are at risk and in a poor state of repair. They need support if they are to have a meaningful future.

In conclusion, the town centre HAZ is a great opportunity to put Longton firmly on the tourist map. Local partners are working with Historic England to agree a plan, managed and chaired by a board, to kick-start the process of bringing historic buildings back into use. I cannot stress enough the importance of that work in a town such as Longton, which is turning a corner and keen to share its successes as a city that is on the up.

We can save the heritage buildings that make people want to visit us by restoring them for alternative commercial and residential use. That would increase footfall, bringing people back into our town centres, benefiting local retailers and providing jobs. A town centre HAZ gives property owners a welcome forum to ask for advice from the local council and Historic England. It can also inspire new entrants to the local property market, who can secure the future of our heritage buildings with sustainable commercial uses. It is essential that we incentivise property owners to convert properties for new uses, ensuring that the important historic fabric of our town centres has a long-lasting future.

**David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con):** As a former landlord who once owned a historic building, I can attest to what my hon. Friend is saying. The upstairs rooms of that building were offices, but they are now being turned into flats. Does he agree that such work should not just be an isolated case in the north-west of England, but should be rolled out across the land?

**John Howell (Henley) (Con):** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David.

I start by congratulating my hon. Friend for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing this debate and particularly on bringing into the open the examples of town centre heritage action zones that he has mentioned. Of course, he concentrated on heritage-led regeneration and it was right for him to do so. However, he also concentrated on the need to use buildings to their greatest effect, stressing the importance of bringing buildings back into use as we go through the process of improving town centres.

The starting point for me on this issue is how all of this activity can help to show, first, that we can breathe new life into the high streets of our towns and, secondly, how we can help to regenerate people's shopping experience, eating experience and just the experience of enjoying a good environment in which to take a stroll, enjoy sport or whatever.

I look at this issue wearing two hats. First of all, I look at it wearing the hat of an archaeologist, which I was until a little while before I came into this House, and I also look at it wearing the hat of a planning expert. I use the term "expert" loosely; it is a term that is applied to me, rather than one that I apply myself.

I will consider the archaeological perspective first. We need to stress that people are genuinely interested in the archaeology and the history of the place in which they live. If I ask someone in one of the two towns in my constituency what their impression of the town is, they will always refer to some moment of history in describing how the town has grown.

Neither of the two towns in my constituency has become a town centre heritage action zone; the Minister will correct me if I am wrong, but I think that neither Henley nor Thame fall into that category. I know that he does not wish for us all to use this debate as an opportunity to lobby him to include our own towns within a HAZ, but let me not disappoint my colleagues by staying away from that subject. I do not actually mind which one of the two towns the Minister chooses—he could even choose both—but it would be nice to have one in a HAZ.

I will stay on the subject of archaeology for a little longer. We have a development in the centre of Henley, just off the market square, that has had to have archaeological excavation before the planned buildings can be put up. That excavation has revealed a fascinating pattern from the 12th and 13th centuries, which shows how the town developed. It did not develop in an ad hoc
3.2 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on highlighting the opportunities that town centre heritage action zones offer to towns such as Congleton, which I have the privilege of representing. Indeed, I believe that Congleton would be an ideal candidate for such a scheme, because the funding and support provided would add real value to the energy that is already demonstrated in the town by volunteers, council staff, the town hall, local businesses and the local community. That energy already makes Congleton a pleasant and enjoyable place to live, work and visit. However, the heritage action zone scheme—£40 million announced this autumn to improve up to 60 historic high streets, over a four-year programme of high street improvements and cultural activities—could, I believe, add an extra bonus to the work that is already being done locally.

Congleton has a strong community life. Only recently, the pedestrian area of the town centre has been beautifully improved, which has added much to the enjoyment of shopping within the town and the opportunities that local retailers have to promote their produce. In addition, there are many activities in Congleton throughout the year, a few of which I will touch on in a moment. Congleton town centre itself, opposite the historic town hall, has a number of buildings in the Lawton Street conservation area that would benefit from the support that the town centre action zone could provide.

Congleton is of real historic interest, and there are many towns across the country like it: places that local people know are enormously interesting and attractive, but people outside those towns are often unaware of. They are places where people who live within a short distance—an hour or so—could come to spend a pleasant day out, or even a weekend. My belief is that some added investment in the town centre could act as a catalyst to providing additional tourism opportunities at the weekends. For example, just a few minutes out of town, we have Brereton Heath country park; Little Moreton Hall, the black and white timbered National Trust property; and Astbury Mere, where young people go sailing and there is a beautiful park for dog walking. All of these areas, combined with greater interest and support in the town centre itself, would mean that we would attract visitors not only for a day, but for a weekend. Why travel long distances to enjoy a break away when often, within a short distance of where we live, there are some really interesting historic towns? However, as Heritage England has said, those towns are often unsung outside of their immediate area.

Congleton has a great history. It was a mill town in the 1700s, and as well as making silk, it was almost unique in producing a material called fustian, linked with velvet cutting. Ribbon weaving started in Congleton in the 1750s, and continues to this day with Berisfords Ribbons, which is a key business in the town and a member of the very active East Cheshire chamber of commerce, based in Congleton. I hope that the Minister will visit Congleton to see what an ideal candidate it would be for a town heritage action zone. Jackie MacArthur, the town centre marketing manager for Congleton, is based at the town hall, and like her colleagues, she does a tremendous amount to support the life of the town. She has said:

“Congleton is very proud of its heritage and is getting geared up to celebrate 750 years of its charter (2022)”

in fact, it is in its 750th year since the mayor was established as we speak.

The town held its first heritage and antiques festival this year. The town has a fine Grade 1 listed Georgian Church...built between 1740 and 1742...one of the finest examples of a Georgian church interior in the country.”

I am pleased to say that that is currently undergoing major restoration work, costing over £350,000, which underlines the historic value of the property.

The town has aspirations to improve other buildings in the town centre area, including the cenotaph and Bradshaw House, built in the 1820s, which I have spoken about before in this place. It would make an ideal
location for Congleton Museum, but it is currently unoccupied, and has been for some time. It is a historic grade 2 listed Georgian building; it is a few yards from the town hall, so it is right in the centre of the Lawton Street conservation area. It is currently owned by Cheshire East Council, and it would enable Congleton Museum, which has now been in existence for 17 years, to expand.

Congleton Museum, a charitable trust run entirely by volunteers, is now the area’s leading museum in collecting and analysing archaeological finds. It has been entrusted with the care of important hoards from wider afield, but it simply has inadequate room to display them. Its status has brought about many partnerships with the national museum community, including the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. However, it desperately needs to move from its current cramped premises at the back of Congleton town hall into new premises, and as I say, Bradshaw House would be an ideal building for it to move into. That would provide not only museum space, but a café and plenty of room for school visits, which the museum currently hosts but could offer much more of if that move could be made. If Bradshaw House could be renovated, that would be an important and practical way in which a town centre heritage action zone could make a difference for the people of Congleton. The local energy that exists needs that additional national support to make it happen.

I want to touch on two or three of the events that Congleton holds to give a flavour of what happens throughout the year. On 24 November we had our Christmas lights switch-on. It was a whole day of organised events and thousands of people came to the town centre of Congleton. We had a Christmas market in the streets and the town hall full of charity and school stalls. We had a lantern parade, the lights switch-on and fireworks. I pay tribute to the town hall centre staff and all the volunteers who made it happen.

As another example of the rich depth of cultural activities, on Saturday I will be at the Congleton Choral Society’s Christmas concert with the philharmonic brass ensemble in the town hall. It has several concerts a year, and I am privileged and honoured to be president of the choral society. Its performances really are of an exceptionally high quality. Any visitor who wants to spend a weekend in Congleton and its surroundings would enjoy visiting the buildings and the more recognised tourist attractions, and almost every weekend there is a concert or a show at the Dane-side theatre, which is a very active local theatre in walking distance of the town hall.

Visitors during much of the year can enjoy the incredible floral displays across the town. Council staff, councillors and volunteers are tremendously committed to putting in hours of time over the year to create an attractive town for people to live in and visit. I commend the town because last month for the eighth consecutive time we won the gold large town award at the North West in Bloom awards ceremony. Also, the town was overall champion at the Cheshire Community Pride awards, and at the end of October achieved a gold award at the national Britain in Bloom awards in Belfast: a real accolade for the town people of Congleton.

As a historic town, Congleton could not be a more appropriate place for a town centre heritage action zone. I unashamedly invite the Minister to visit. I look forward to meeting English Heritage representatives to discuss how the town could benefit. Its website states: “Working with local people and partners, including local authorities, Historic England is helping to breathe new life into old places that are rich in heritage and full of promise—unlocking their potential and making them more attractive to residents, businesses, tourists and investors...through joint-working, grant funding and sharing skills...places will be recognised and celebrated for their unique character and heritage”.

I do not think there is a better place than Congleton for that to happen.

3.13 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I do not intend to distract the House for very long because we have had a good and thorough debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Jack Brereton) on securing it. We did not hear much about Wedgwood in his 23-minute speech, but it is entirely appropriate that a representative from Wedgwood’s hometown secured this debate.

As we know, Wedgwood was one of the great pioneers and entrepreneurs of the industrial revolution, but his field of interest extended far wider than simply the business of pottery. He was a great civic entrepreneur. What he created in Etruria was a model not only of modern factories, but of modern communities. He was a civic entrepreneur with a great interest in civil engineering, so his great push behind the Grand Union canal literally changed the economic geography of our country by providing the crucible of the industrial revolution in the west midlands, with new access to the ports, particularly the ports of Liverpool.

This debate needs the inspiration of great forebears such as Wedgwood. That is a long way of saying that I think the starting point for this debate and the consensus on which I want to start is the idea that our heritage and history bring us together. A deepening understanding of the place around us helps us to develop a sense of our own place in the world around us. That is why heritage action zones are such a good idea and I, too, add my congratulations to Historic England and its partners in local authorities and elsewhere on introducing and developing the initiative. We can learn a great deal from it.

Heritage action zones are particularly important for the Opposition, because we know now that culture is an important driver of modern economic development. We have seen it in towns and cities around the world. We saw it in spades in the extraordinary year of culture in Hull and we are now seeing it in the great city of Coventry, superbly led by my friend, the leader of Coventry Council, George Duggins. Many of us relish what will go on in Coventry. I hope the Minister will have the opportunity to spend some time there and draw out some of the lessons from that successful council’s leadership to inform others.

I want to add a particular note about industrial heritage and its role in town centre action zones. I agreed very much with the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South when he underlined the importance of that particular aspect of town centre heritage. I commend the superb report written and presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), who chairs the all-party group on industrial heritage. He
underlines the way in which industrial heritage can often be better protected and celebrated by ensuring that there are good development plans for town centres. The history that we find in our town centres is often one of the big magnets—one of the big draws—and therefore one of the secrets to economic development in the years to come. My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen wrote:

“Industrial heritage has to be accessible: both physically, and to our modern, diverse communities.”

That is a lesson that we are now seeing incorporated in some action zone plans.

However, we have to be honest about the challenges. The scale of the fund, £55 million, comes nowhere near close to filling in the gap carved out by a 32% cut in council funding over the past few years. As the son of a planner, I feel quite strongly—this will echo some of the comments that we have heard this afternoon—about bad planning decisions scarring the urban landscape taking shape around us. Very often, such decisions are made these days because there are no planners left. In the great city of Birmingham, for example, very few people are left in the planning department. As for the number of architects now employed by local authorities, once upon a time I think half the country’s architects were employed by councils, but now there are very few left. I am afraid that that has implications for the quality of planning decisions and the urban environment that we will leave to the people who take our place.

Equally, we have to be realistic about the economic pressure that now weighs heavily on our high streets. That is of enormous importance to this House. Our high streets contribute some £100 billion to our economy and employ some 21,000 people. It is not a marginal issue in the debates that we have about the future of our economy; it is of critical importance.

The Heritage Lottery Fund, through its programme, “New ideas need old buildings”, made the point that our historic quarters are very often the crucibles of new ideas, new businesses, new jobs, new potential and new opportunities, which is something that we see in my home city of Birmingham. In the jewellery quarter, for example, ably represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), we see a flourishing of small business that has helped to ensure our city is now the second biggest home for start-ups outside London. If we wander around the jewellery quarter, we see a lively amount of economic activity as new businesses begin to flourish.

In conclusion, I want to make three points to the Minister—advice, perhaps, from the Opposition. I have two general points and one specific point. I will follow others in adding to his list of good ideas that need much closer attention. The first is that, given the economic pressure on high streets and the scale of cuts that have been made in local authorities, the Minister and those of his poor officials not currently engaged in no-deal planning in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport would do well to look at Labour’s idea for a £1 billion cultural capital fund to put in their bid to the comprehensive spending review next year. If the House believes that culture has a critical role to play, not just in equipping the country for the digital economy, but in making sure that we put the requisite level of investment into the ideas we have discussed this afternoon, it will not happen for free. Local authorities are not geared up to supply the funds that are needed. Therefore, it is important that a good strong culture bid goes to the Treasury from the Department next year.

The second idea that I urge the Minister to look at is the Daily Mirror’s high street fightback campaign. The Daily Mirror has done a good job, zeroing in on a concern that is of huge interest around the country. It has been well backed by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and its general secretary Paddy Lillis, and it has developed a common-sense manifesto of ideas, such as free bus travel for young people, free wi-fi, good bus routes, a register of landlords for empty shops, and regular reviews of business rates. Those are good ideas, which the Department should champion if it wants to advance the agenda set out by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South.

I want, finally, to make a point about Birmingham. As the Minister will know, the second biggest civic collection outside London is in Birmingham. The civic collection of art and historic artefacts is worth something like £2 billion—there are about £1 billion-worth of paintings, and about £1 billion-worth of objects. Many of the objects are now languishing in a warehouse in Nechells that has a leaky roof and is prone to floods.

Why on earth are we allowing High Speed 2 to develop, in the middle of our city, something that looks like a shed, with limited design and cultural potential? Why are we not using that massive-scale investment in a brand new High Speed 2 station, at the heart of the industrial revolution, to create the greatest science museum in the country? Why do we not designate the area around Curzon Street a heritage action zone? Why do we not use the hundreds of millions of pounds of new investment to create a space enabling us to take the objects out of the warehouse—artefacts going back to the days of Boulton and Watt—and build a facility that means that anyone who arrives on the high-speed train in Birmingham knows they are arriving at the home of the industrial revolution? The director general of the Science Museum and others from our home city will lobby the Minister about that in the coming months. However, some positive vibrations from the Minister about the notion would be welcome this afternoon.
England, so we should look after and value our listed buildings, and recognise them for the assets that they are. In 2017, the heritage sector alone provided estimated total gross value added of £29 billion, which is equivalent to 2% of national GVA.

John Howell: I used to run a film production company and we chose to locate it in the Temple. The people who came to visit us were most impressed because we were the only film production company there, and there was all the surrounding heritage to see and enjoy.

Michael Ellis: We see that in many cases. Heritage buildings are an attraction to all types of business, including high-tech ones. The importance of our heritage was fully recognised in “The Culture White Paper”, published by my Department in 2016. It was the first White Paper on culture to be published by any Government since 1965. It made commitments to several new schemes, including Historic England’s heritage action zones, which several Members have spoken about today. As colleagues know, the zones are a flagship scheme to target areas of untapped potential, bringing historic places back to life to attract residents, tourists, businesses and investors, and to create economic growth in villages, towns and cities across England.

The scheme, like many of the schemes in the White Paper, champions a joined-up approach whereby Historic England works in partnership alongside local partners such as local authorities and local businesses. A first round of 10 heritage action zones was announced in March 2017. They included Sunderland, Nottingham, Hull and Coventry—the latter two were of course selected as the UK city of culture for 2017 and 2021 respectively—and Walworth in London, which was one of my first visits when I took my present ministerial post in January. I also enjoyed a visit to Coventry this year.

A further eight heritage action zones were announced as part of my Department’s heritage statement, which was published this time last year. The second round included Stoke-on-Trent, where, of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South has his constituency. I congratulate him again: I understand that he is the youngest MP of his intake—I am sometimes mistaken to see in the same way. [Laughter.] I do not know why everyone is laughing.

My hon. Friend is a heritage star, who cares very much about heritage and his constituency, which is reflected in the fact that he secured the debate, and in the speech he made. I understand that Stoke-on-Trent City Council is due to refurbish Gladstone Pottery Museum as part of the heritage action zone. That will of course help to attract further visitors. I recommend that if it has not already done so, the pottery museum should contact Arts Council England about eligibility for the museum development grant programme, which provides a network of advice and support for all accredited museums. There could be some suggestions for increasing visitor numbers, and for financial sustainability.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South mentioned VisitEngland and VisitBritain. VisitEngland’s role is primarily about developing tourism products, as in the successful £40 million Discover England fund. That £40 million is put into a fund by the Government to encourage tourism outside the London area. Domestic marketing is not part of its current remit, although I am considering that at the moment. Tourism to the area is not one of the primary focuses of the heritage action zone initiative. It is a secondary focus; we obviously want tourists to visit. When heritage action zones start to become more public facing, Historic England will work with local and national organisations including VisitEngland to encourage tourism. We very much want that. Tourism is doing well in this country and numbers are healthy and increasing, but we always want more. Historic England is monitoring the outputs of the heritage action zone programme against a set of programme indicators and surveys.

Historic England has completed a full year of data collection for the first 10 heritage action zones. I believe that monitoring data for round 2, which includes Stoke, is currently being collected by Historic England, so it is still a bit early to evaluate the impact on visitor numbers in those areas. I applaud the work of my hon. Friend in supporting the heritage action zone in his area, and the work he has done to support that growing industry in his constituency.

Officials from the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and from my Department are currently working with the ceramics sector to explore how they can support the industry. I was delighted that last month the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced the Government’s intention to deliver a sector deal with the tourism industry. We have entered into negotiations with the industry about what precisely that will look like, and I have asked it to come to us soon with a strong offer to help increase skills, accessibility and data sharing. When that sector deal is concluded, I am convinced that the tourism industry across the country will benefit. Potential rail improvements to aid tourism are a matter for Network Rail rather than my Department, but we work closely with the Rail Delivery Group—I think I met it earlier in the year—and I will ask my officials to discuss the matter further.

Historic England welcomes the Building Better, Building Beautiful commission as an addition to the range of initiatives taken in recent years to improve the quality of design across England—something I think we all want. That will help to raise awareness of the importance of design in regeneration, and support a sense of community and place. His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales has done a lot and encouraged a great deal in that area, and the commission is a very good thing.

I was pleased this year when the impact of heritage-led regeneration through the heritage action zones scheme was recognised in the Grimsby town deal. Indeed, the Greater Grimsby heritage action zone was announced as part of that town deal, highlighting the many links between heritage and this Government’s industrial strategy. I am sure there is more to be done in other areas.

Honorables Members can imagine my delight when my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the Budget £55 million of funding for my Department for heritage high streets. The Government are working in many ways, and in many different shapes and forms, to help the high street and deal with the issues raised by internet shopping. That £55 million for heritage high streets was very positive and, as hon. Members will know, part of a wider £675 million future high streets fund—a very large sum. Some £40 million of that fund will provide a most welcome boost to
Historic England, an arm’s length body, to run a purely high streets-focused heritage action zone programme, beginning in 2019. I see that as a major success of which I am very proud, and that Budget commitment from Her Majesty’s Treasury shows just how much the Government recognise the importance of the country’s heritage. It is a major investment.

Since 1998, the Heritage Lottery Fund has invested significant amounts of national lottery funding in towns and townscapes. I encourage everyone to participate in the national lottery because those good causes, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, are a positive thing. Since 1998, a minimum of around £300 million has gone mainly, but not exclusively, to townscape heritage and townscapes initiative programmes. HLF decisions are taken at arm’s length from Government. A couple of colleagues mentioned my input and offered me very generous invitations to visit various parts of the country, but such decisions are taken at arm’s length from Government—perhaps that is just as well when my hon. Friends ask me these things—and we are, quite rightly, not involved in the grant-making process, which is done independently.

The heritage action zone scheme aims to bring in funding from across the sector, and others, for local benefit both economically and—just as importantly from my perspective—for the historic environment. A heritage action zone can apply for funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, although not for a part of a project that is already being funded as part of the heritage action zone initiative. Therefore, Historic England could fund one part of a project, and the Heritage Lottery Fund another. There is nothing to stop that happening. Indeed, round 1 heritage action zones are sharing Historic England funding of £6 million, and benefiting from a further £18 million secured in match funding. About £1 of investment from Historic England generates further investment from the public and private sectors of £3.10—more than triple—so it is worth doing.

We must have regard to the public purse and—unlike previous Governments—to spending within our means in all the things we do. However, we must certainly have a very special regard for heritage, and I thank again all hon. Members who have contributed to today’s debate. I would be delighted to visit the Stoke-on-Trent heritage action zone, and indeed Henley and Congleton if the diary allows. My Department is looking at some possible dates next year for either the Secretary of State or me to visit Stoke-on-Trent.

I thank the Minister for his kind and helpful comments. He recognised how important heritage and heritage buildings are to our economy, as well as the wider value of investing in our heritage. I am pleased that he mentioned the White Paper and the support given by the Department for that agenda. I thank him for his suggestions, particularly those on Gladstone Pottery Museum and the help that could be given to its programme of improvements.

I thank the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) for his comments. I did not agree with everything, and I hope he will not mind if I correct him on one thing. Although the modern-day factory and museum are in my constituency, Wedgwood was born in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) in Burslem, which is one of the other five towns that make up the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent. He was not born in Longton, I am afraid.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for their contributions, and particularly for sharing their knowledge of their constituencies and the importance of that heritage. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who mentioned the importance of converting properties.

Question put and agreed to. 

Resolved.

That this House has considered town centre heritage action zones.

I thank the Minister for his kind and helpful comments. He recognised how important heritage and heritage buildings are to our economy, as well as the wider value of investing in our heritage. I am pleased that he mentioned the White Paper and the support given by the Department for that agenda. I thank him for his suggestions, particularly those on Gladstone Pottery Museum and the help that could be given to its programme of improvements.

I thank the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) for his comments. I did not agree with everything, and I hope he will not mind if I correct him on one thing. Although the modern-day factory and museum are in my constituency, Wedgwood was born in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) in Burslem, which is one of the other five towns that make up the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent. He was not born in Longton, I am afraid.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for their contributions, and particularly for sharing their knowledge of their constituencies and the importance of that heritage. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who mentioned the importance of converting properties.

Question put and agreed to. 

Resolved.

That this House has considered town centre heritage action zones.

I thank the Minister for his kind and helpful comments. He recognised how important heritage and heritage buildings are to our economy, as well as the wider value of investing in our heritage. I am pleased that he mentioned the White Paper and the support given by the Department for that agenda. I thank him for his suggestions, particularly those on Gladstone Pottery Museum and the help that could be given to its programme of improvements.

I thank the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) for his comments. I did not agree with everything, and I hope he will not mind if I correct him on one thing. Although the modern-day factory and museum are in my constituency, Wedgwood was born in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) in Burslem, which is one of the other five towns that make up the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent. He was not born in Longton, I am afraid.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Henley (John Howell) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for their contributions, and particularly for sharing their knowledge of their constituencies and the importance of that heritage. Finally, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who mentioned the importance of converting properties.

Question put and agreed to. 

Resolved.

That this House has considered town centre heritage action zones.

I thank the Minister for his kind and helpful comments. He recognised how important heritage and heritage buildings are to our economy, as well as the wider value of investing in our heritage. I am pleased that he mentioned the White Paper and the support given by the Department for that agenda. I thank him for his suggestions, particularly those on Gladstone Pottery Museum and the help that could be given to its programme of improvements.

I thank the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne) for his comments. I did not agree with everything, and I hope he will not mind if I correct him on one thing. Although the modern-day factory and museum are in my constituency, Wedgwood was born in the constituency of the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) in Burslem, which is one of the other five towns that make up the six towns of Stoke-on-Trent. He was not born in Longton, I am afraid.
Leaving the EU: UK Orchestras

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHope in the Chair]

4 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effect on UK orchestras of the UK leaving the EU.

I am delighted to be serving under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir Christopher, and to see the Minister and the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) in their places.

British orchestras are a global success story. They tour around the world, forge new markets in emerging economies and contribute to UK soft power and cultural exchange, but Europe is their most important marketplace. They are particularly worried about the prospect of a no-deal Brexit, which could put the survival of some well-known British orchestras at risk. Even with a deal, if the UK is going to leave the EU, orchestras need assurances, particularly ahead of the forthcoming comprehensive spending review. I understand from the conversations I have had that the key concerns are: first, the risk and danger of increased bureaucracy and costs associated with European touring after Brexit; secondly, funding, particularly given constrained public support; and, thirdly, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining EU nationals. I will take each of those points in turn and put six specific questions to the Minister.

I turn first to the increased difficulties in touring. Touring is intrinsic to the business model of British orchestras. Additional costs from controls on migration could price UK orchestras out in quite a fragile market. Orchestras need to be somebody who knows the particular role or repertoire. There may well be nobody suitable in the UK.

John Howell (Henley) (Con): Fortunately, the instrument I play, the organ, cannot be put into the back of a van, but other instruments can. We need a firm indication that musicians will still be able to travel in order to make their concert schedules.

Stephen Timms: That is not the first issue that comes to mind when one thinks about the challenges ahead, but it is an important one, and it is absolutely right for the hon. Gentleman to raise it.

Public funding for British orchestras has been cut sharply since 2010, as has funding from devolved Governments and local authorities, and there has been a cut of up to 30% from Arts Council England. Since 2016, the orchestra tax relief—I have no doubt the right hon. Member for Wantage had something to do with that—has been vital to the financial sustainability of orchestras, but at the moment we do not know whether British organisations will continue to be eligible for funding through Creative Europe or the other EU programmes, so UK Government investment is absolutely vital to orchestras, concert halls, festivals and promoters. What assurances can the Minister give at this early stage about funding for culture in the forthcoming comprehensive spending review?

Corporate sponsorship is down since the 2008 downturn. Arts and business incentive schemes saw corporate sponsorship rise to a total of just over £170 million in 2006-07, but it fell after that. In 2011-12, it was down to £113 million. Figures have not been published since then, but reports from orchestras suggest that it has continued to decline since. Can we look at new opportunities for incentivising corporate sponsorship? The Association of British Orchestras has proposed a tax incentive for investment in cultural organisations along the lines of the existing tax credit for research and development. Is that an idea that is being pursued?

Unlike in other countries, orchestras from the UK do not get any financial support for touring. They tour on an entirely commercial basis, so they are relatively expensive for foreign promoters. That is particularly difficult in new markets where the costs and risks of touring are greater. Might there be consideration of a new international touring fund in the new era?

I turn to recruitment and retention, which we have been discussing in the House this afternoon with the Home Secretary as he published the migration White Paper. British orchestras, operas and ballet companies rely on guest artists, conductors, soloists, singers and dancers being able to travel in and out of the UK, often just for a single engagement. Orchestras may have to replace an artist who has cancelled because of illness or injury at very short notice, and the replacement artist needs to be somebody who knows the particular role or repertoire. There may well be nobody suitable in the UK.

A lot of orchestral musicians—permanent or freelancing—are overseas nationals. The average percentage of EU nationals in UK orchestras is 8.3%. In some well-known orchestras, they account for more than 20% of the permanent musicians. The Government have rightly included principal and sub-principal orchestral musicians on the shortage occupation list. That means that orchestras can recruit under the tier 2 points-based system from outside the European Economic Area without recourse to the resident labour market test. Other players are subject to such tests, but the Association of British Orchestras has secured an extension to the recruitment period of up to 24 months, recognising the rigorous and lengthy auditioning and trialling process that is required. Recruitment under the points-based system is bureaucratic and costly, and orchestras are worried that if the system is extended to Europe after Brexit, as is proposed, there will be major new red tape and costs for them.

The salary threshold for entering the UK with an initial job offer is £30,500, which is above the average starting salary for non-soloist musicians in lots of orchestras, particularly outside London. The threshold for obtaining indefinite leave after five years is £35,000 a year. Public spending cuts mean that orchestral salaries have flatlined.
and roles in orchestras may well not meet those thresholds. We have heard from the Home Secretary that there will be a year’s consultation around exactly how the arrangements will work, but I think the Minister will recognise the concerns that orchestras have, if they are to continue—as they must—to attract global talent. Orchestral musicians are highly skilled, but they are not highly paid.

The Association of British Orchestras, UK Theatre and One Dance UK have written to the Minister with responsibility for the arts, the hon. Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis), urging him to work with the Home Office to secure an exemption for highly skilled performing arts workers who earn below the £30,000 threshold in the proposed Brexit system, and to clarify the position of freelance musicians. That letter requested a meeting. Will he or the Minister who is responding to the debate meet the organisations who signed the letter to discuss that concern?

There is a worry about social security contributions. In the EU, a UK orchestral musician uses an A1 form to prove that they pay social security contributions in the UK, which exempts them from paying social security and health insurance in other EU countries when they are on tour. If, after Brexit, UK musicians no longer have access to the A1 system, it is likely that additional social security deductions of 15% to 20% will be taken from their pay. The financial viability of touring might well be wrecked. Will Ministers seek to ensure continued access to the A1 system after Brexit, perhaps through a bilateral agreement of the kind that is already in place with Switzerland? The recent political declaration commits to maintain

“reciprocal arrangements on the future rules around some defined elements of social security coordination.”

That form of words is not binding, and it is not clear to which elements they refer. I wonder whether the Minister can assure us that the A1 system will be included in those elements that should have reciprocal arrangements, and that steps will be taken to ensure that there will be no additional delays in issuing A1 certificates, because delays could be problematic as well.

There is a longer-term worry that recruitment problems will be compounded as higher education institutions attract fewer students from the European Union. Like many specialist performing arts institutions, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama recruits 20% of its students from the European Union, but already the number of applications from the EU has fallen. It was 495 in 2015-16, but it is 385 in the current academic year. UK institutions’ ability to be world class will be reduced if the skills pipeline of the sector is diminished by our leaving the EU.

We have heard a lot about the impact of leaving the European Union on manufacturers and banks. There will also be a major impact on orchestras, but that has not been widely debated. I am grateful for the opportunity to air these important concerns. The arts and creative industries are estimated to account for 800,000 jobs in London alone.

Let me just recap my questions to the Minister. Has she had any discussions with the Treasury about higher public funding to offset new costs for orchestras that arise from our leaving the European Union? What assurances can the Minister give at this early stage on funding for culture in the spending review? What progress has been made in considering tax incentives to encourage support? What consideration has there been of the possibility of an international touring fund? Will Ministers meet relevant organisations and consult them on exemptions to the salary thresholds for visas?

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I call the Minister.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): What about me?

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Did the right hon. Gentleman indicate that he wanted to be called in this very short debate?

Mr Vaizey: I certainly did.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): In that case—if it has been agreed with the promoter, and the Minister has received notice—I call Ed Vaizey.

4.12 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Thank you very much, Chair. It is a remarkable display of your flexibility, and another reason it is such a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the second day running. I congratulate the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms) on securing this important debate and on putting the case for supporting our orchestras so effectively. I also congratulate the Minister—it is extraordinary that as the right hon. Gentleman was speaking, her Christmas card arrived in my inbox, drawn by Jessica Stinton of Ridgewood High School in Stourbridge. Jessica is now written into the record in Hansard for her beautiful picture of robins. The motto is:

“A time for everyone to come together.”

I think that this debate is a time for everyone to come together to support our orchestras, and the arts more generally, as we go through the turmoil of Brexit. The challenges that our orchestras face are also faced by many different arts organisations—perhaps not professional organ players, who might find it harder to tour, but certainly people in the visual arts—[Interruption.] I can feel that I have provoked my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell). If one wants to know about the quality of Oxfordshire’s cultural sensibilities, it is worth noting that only Oxfordshire MPs have turned up to this debate voluntarily.

John Howell: My right hon. Friend is right to speak of the quality of Oxfordshire MPs and to say that I am an organist—I think that adds to our contribution to the arts as Oxfordshire’s dedicated MPs. I want just to correct him on one thing: he is right to say that I cannot fit my organ in the back of a trailer, but many churches and halls around Europe have organs that can be used, provided that it has been arranged in advance.

Mr Vaizey: That is true. Yesterday I was at the Battersea Arts Centre, which houses a Wurlitzer organ—the largest electric organ of its type in the UK. I hope that my hon. Friend will have the chance one day to play that organ, which is currently being restored.
I digress. The point that I wanted to make is that while I was delighted to receive the Minister’s Christmas card electronically, a physical Christmas card is more tangible—just as a wonderful recording of an orchestra is a brilliant thing, but we ultimately aim to see it perform live. That is why the touring of orchestras is so important, and why British orchestras have seen more than a million more people attend live performances in the past eight years. Another important point is that our orchestras are very much part of this country’s soft power, as are all the arts. In my role as trade envoy to Vietnam, I was lucky enough to see the London Symphony Orchestra perform in Hanoi this year—that is one example. That is why I hope that the Minister will focus on the arguments that have been put forward by the right hon. Member for East Ham on the need to support orchestras and their ability to tour once we have left the European Union.

The right hon. Member for East Ham put some questions to the Minister, and I want to quickly outline three important themes. The first is obviously the physical ability to tour. We know that some of our orchestras have already lost bookings in the EU because of uncertainty about Brexit. It is not clear what future work permits might mean for musicians who are starting up their careers, or even by senior members of orchestras. When I was a Minister, I reflected the kind of salaries that are earned by people who are starting up their careers, or even by senior members of orchestras. When I was a Minister, I was lucky enough to see the London Symphony Orchestra teaching in Hanoi as well as performing.

The third point that the right hon. Member for East Ham made is that the physical movement of people is important for orchestras. Something like 20% of musicians in our top orchestras come from the European Union. The salary threshold of £30,000 does not necessarily reflect the kind of salaries that are earned by people who are starting up their careers, or even by senior members of orchestras. When I was a Minister, I experienced some of the difficulties of getting artists from outside the European Union into the UK to perform. Those kind of obstacles really need to be looked at and overcome. I hope that, as well as considering a touring fund, the Minister will work with the Arts Council England to ensure that there is a special immigration section staffed by experts, who are able to wave through visas as quickly as possible to ensure that touring can be as friction free as possible.

Mr Chope, I thank you for the opportunity to make my points in this very important debate—while focused on orchestras, it is also a model for the wider debate on the future of cultural exchange between the European Union and the UK after Brexit.
unlikely case that we leave the EU without a deal. In either case, we are confident that the creativity and resilience of our orchestras will continue and thrive.

Right hon. and hon. Members have touched on a range of challenges for orchestras, and I will address them in turn. It is tragic that some orchestras have lost bookings on account of Brexit, as we heard from the right hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey). The movement of people is important. A key challenge for our orchestras is how the rules about the movement of people might change. Those concerns have been raised, and I want to address some of them, particularly in the light of the White Paper, which was published this afternoon.

The White Paper is an invitation to interested parties to express their views. I trust that the right hon. Member for East Ham will make his views on the issues pertaining to orchestras apparent during the consultation inspired by the White Paper. In the future, it will be for the UK Government and Parliament to determine the domestic immigration rules that will apply. The Immigration Bill will bring migration from the EU under UK law, enabling us to set out future immigration system in domestic legislation. The movement of people is clearly important to the orchestras of our country. We will continue to work with the Arts Council, and we will look at the proposals it is making for visa waivers in this sector.

In the immigration White Paper, we set out further detail on the system, taking into account the recommendations of the Migration Advisory Committee’s report on European Economic Area migration in the UK. The future system will focus on high skills and welcoming talented and hard-working individuals who will support the UK’s economy, enabling employers to compete on the world stage. The Home Office is launching a year-long engagement to enable business and other stakeholders, such as orchestras, to shape the final details of policy and process.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether my colleague, Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) and me will address some of the matters raised, particularly in the light of the White Paper. I trust that the right hon. Member for East Ham will make his views apparent during the consultation inspired by the White Paper. In the future, it will be for the UK Government and Parliament to determine the domestic immigration rules that will apply. The Immigration Bill will bring migration from the EU under UK law, enabling us to set out future immigration system in domestic legislation. The movement of people is clearly important to the orchestras of our country. We will continue to work with the Arts Council, and we will look at the proposals it is making for visa waivers in this sector.

In the immigration White Paper, we set out further detail on the system, taking into account the recommendations of the Migration Advisory Committee’s report on European Economic Area migration in the UK. The future system will focus on high skills and welcoming talented and hard-working individuals who will support the UK’s economy, enabling employers to compete on the world stage. The Home Office is launching a year-long engagement to enable business and other stakeholders, such as orchestras, to shape the final details of policy and process.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether my colleague, the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Tourism, would meet with the Association of British Orchestras. Following the publication of the White Paper, he will certainly be able to meet the right hon. Gentleman and the Association of British Orchestras to discuss this matter in greater detail.

Orchestras have expressed concern about the salary threshold. Indeed, the right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Migration Advisory Committee threshold of £30,000. We will discuss with businesses what a suitable salary threshold should be. If a skilled job is considered to be in shortage in the UK, a lower salary threshold is likely to apply. The right hon. Gentleman mentioned that skills do not necessarily relate to salary, and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is well aware of that.

Sir Christopher, should I allow a little time for the right hon. Gentleman to sum up?

Margot James: I apologise. I am never clear on that point.

As hon. Members pointed out, it is not only the movement of people, but the movement of objects, that is important to orchestras. They move a huge amount of equipment around with them, much of it valuable, historic or both. They work on tight timeframes and are under pressure not to separate musicians from their instruments for long periods. I am aware that some musicians are worried that new customs processes will lead to increased cost, delay and inconvenience, which could disrupt touring schedules.

Hon. Members will know that the Government’s plan for EU exit aims to preserve frictionless trade for the majority of UK goods. Furthermore, in the political declaration, the UK and the EU recognise the importance of the temporary movement of objects and equipment in enabling co-operation in the cultural and education sectors. That, of course, includes musical instruments.

Orchestras are also concerned about customs processes in the unlikely case that the UK leaves the European Union without a deal. I hope hon. Members will understand that the issue of customs processes in the event of no deal is a broader, but no less important, issue than the one before us today. My Department has been working closely with Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to understand the pressures on our orchestras to ensure that we are prepared and that communications reach the right people and contain the information they need to allow orchestras to prepare.

Another challenge that was raised is the importance and value of EU funding programmes to the UK’s cultural sector, including orchestras. Creative Europe provides support for international cultural relations and creative projects. Collaboration is vital for culture to thrive. Creative Europe has demonstrated that international partnership enables the cultural sectors to share expertise, build relationships and produce exemplary creative works.

As the Prime Minister made clear in the White Paper on our future relationship with the EU, the UK wants to build on our long history of working together to continue to produce and promote excellent culture.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Public Service Pensions: Government Contributions

4.30 pm

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the reduction in Government contributions to public service pensions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. This debate is important to highlight the impact, across the public sector, of the reduction in Government pension contributions.

The Government are implementing a further reduction in the discount rate for public service pension schemes from 2.8% to 2.4%, which will take effect in 2019-20. Clearly, the reduction in Government contributions to public sector pensions is going to increase the strain across the public sector. Although the changes will have an impact across public services, for the purpose of the debate I will focus mainly on the police and fire services.

The reduction in Government contributions to public sector pensions will clearly add further strain to our frontline services, which have faced huge financial challenges, following eight years of Tory austerity. By 2021, police services will be expected to find around £420 million in order to set a balanced budget—that could mean losing a further 10,000 police officers. The change is also estimated to cost fire services £150 million by 2023, which is roughly equivalent to the cost of running 150 fire stations for a year.

To provide a bit of background, in the 2016 Budget the Chancellor announced a discount rate reduction from 3% to 2.8%, with effect from April next year. The Treasury decided more recently, however, that a further reduction—to 2.4%—was required. In September 2018, the Government said that the Departments and devolved Administrations would need to meet, in full, the increase in costs in the 2016 Budget announcement. The Treasury has advised that public bodies will be supported in meeting unforeseen costs in the 2019-20 financial year, when the changes first take effect, but compensation beyond the first year cannot be guaranteed.

Public service providers would have to increase employer contributions to the Treasury with no guarantee that additional moneys would be compensated beyond 2019-20. If public bodies were not compensated for the increased contributions beyond the first year, that would mean an indirect spending cut. Affected employers will therefore be forced to make costly changes without any certainty that Government funding for frontline services will be proportionately increased in years to come.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for securing this important debate. Does he agree that although it is right and proper that NHS funding is ring-fenced until 2023-24, other frontline services, such as firefighters and the police, must also have the same protection as a matter of right, in recognition of the type of work that we call on them to carry out—to protect and serve?

Gerald Jones: I agree. All our emergency services do important work on our behalf, and that work needs investment. They cannot do that important work while worrying about how they are going to fund it.

There are significant concerns that the Treasury has introduced the changes as back-door spending cuts for already tightly squeezed public bodies and those delivering public services. In 2016, the trade union for senior civil servants, the FDA, said:

“It’s only three months since departmental budgets were set and yet departments are now expected to deliver an additional £3.5bn of savings in 2019/20 through another efficiency review...By announcing a change to the discount rate on public sector pensions—without any consultation—they are effectively removing a further £2 billion from public services and transferring it to the Treasury to give the illusion of a surplus”.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. On the cuts that he refers to, the South Yorkshire fire and rescue authority concluded in its financial plan that combined with the cuts and the 10 years of austerity, the pension contribution hikes will leave it no choice but to reduce fire services, with an increased risk to people and property as a result. Does he agree that the pension changes pose a clear and direct risk to the safety of our constituents?

Gerald Jones: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Emergency services, such as firefighters and the police, are highly regarded and do important work on behalf of all our constituents. Safety will be an issue if the finances are not put in order to ensure that the accounts allow firefighters to continue their important work.

Earlier this year, the trade union Prospect said:

“Public sector employers will have to find additional resources to reflect these changes...However there is a real danger that Treasury will not recycle this money back to public service providers; that this process will, in effect, be a hidden cut to public services.”

As I said earlier, the discount rate change is estimated to cost firefighters £150 million by 2023, based on figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility. That is the equivalent of running 150 fire stations for a year. In 2017-18, employer pension contributions accounted for 7% of the total net expenditure among fire and rescue services in England, and for 7.6% of it in Wales. In England, local government settlement funding for the fire authorities is forecast to decrease by 15% between 2016-17 and 2019-20.

The impact on police is equally stark. By 2020-21, the police will face a financial black hole as their pension liability rises by around £420 million. The chair of the National Police Chiefs Council has warned that it could amount to a loss of a further 10,000 police officers, because the police are legally obliged to set a balanced budget. The recently announced settlement offers no certainty on the issue.

The National Police Chiefs Council is reported to have sent a formal letter to the Treasury saying that it will seek a judicial review of the Government’s proposals, and it is protesting against the fact that forces will have to find an extra £417 million in just two years’ time to pay for an increased minimum contribution to officers’ pension pots. That figure is set to rise from 2% to 3% by 2019 and, as I said, equates to the funding of around 10,000 officers a year. In response to an urgent question on 6 November about liabilities for the police pension schemes, the Minister said that funding arrangements for 2020-21 onwards would be discussed as part of the spending review.
[Gerald Jones]

I have covered the national picture, but I will highlight the local impact on my constituency. Two-thirds of my constituency is covered by South Wales police. The gap in that force for 2020-21, and for every year after, is likely to be around £7 million. If that burden is dumped on police forces, it will effectively be another massive cut to police budgets and lead to a further cut in police numbers. Those changes come on top of the additional £20 million that South Wales police have to find for local policing, having lost about a third of the police grant since 2011. In south Wales, the changes would be the equivalent of 130 fewer police officers on the streets, on top of the 444 officers who have already been lost since 2010.

The Home Office appears to have accepted that the police budgets are under severe constraints and, in the absence of central Government money, flexibility is being granted to raise local police precept to help to offset an enormous sustained challenge to police funding from seven years of cuts. Raising ever-increasing amounts from council tax payers, however, is not sustainable. Will the Minister fight to restore police funding to sustainable levels in the planned comprehensive spending review? Will he promise that the gap in funding for police pensions will be paid in full by the Government, having accepted that the police pensions costs increases cannot be funded from existing police budgets for 2019-20? I ask the Minister to note that the Home Affairs Committee said that the police funding formula must be addressed urgently. Can he assure us that that will also be tackled in the comprehensive spending review in 2019?

The other third of my constituency falls within the area of Gwent police. In cash terms, the changes add £2 million of extra costs to its budget in 2019-20—although some of that will be offset by the Home Office—and a further £3 million of extra costs in 2020-21. That totals around £5 million, recurrently. A recurrent pension pressure of £5 million for the Gwent police force equates to 100 police officers in Gwent communities. It would be necessary to increase the local precept in Gwent disproportionately, by about 8% by 2021. Such figures are not sustainable and would transfer ever more pressure to local council tax payers.

As I said at the start of my contribution, the changes will impact across the public sector. I have focused on police and fire, but I will highlight briefly the effect of the recent changes to the teachers’ pension scheme on universities throughout the UK. The Treasury appears to have shown little awareness of the significant impact that those changes would have on universities and students, and has failed to commit any additional support for the institutions affected. I accept that the Minister will respond on behalf of the Home Office, but I hope that he will convey our concerns to his colleagues. I understand that the Government themselves estimate that the changes will mean additional pension costs of £142 million, shared across only 70 of the modern, or post-1992, universities. That will clearly place huge strain on budgets that are already under significant pressure.

Today, I hope that the Minister will be able to offer some good news to our overstretched public services. We all know how stretched the police and fire services, unless the Government take action to ensure that public bodies are compensated for their additional contributions.

As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones) for securing this important debate. I am grateful to him because he is shining a light on a very important issue that Parliament has not given enough attention to. The reduction in Government contributions to public sector pensions from 2.8% to 2.4% will have a huge impact and place additional strain on our already overstretched public services, unless the Government take action to ensure that public bodies are compensated for their additional contributions.

By 2021, police services will be expected to find an extra £420 million, which equates to the loss of a further 10,000 police officers if all the authorities set a balanced budget. The change is also estimated to cost our fire services an extra £150 million by 2023, which is equivalent to running 150 fire stations. The problem seems particularly acute when it is placed alongside the cuts to local government, because the poorest local authorities in this country have borne the biggest cuts—my own authority in Durham will have seen a massive 60% cut in its budget between 2010 and 2020. If the Government do not compensate our local authorities properly for the measure, we will see a further negative impact on our public services. In our own local communities, we all know how stretched the police and fire services already are. It is important for them to be funded adequately by the Government.

As we heard from my hon. Friend in his excellent and comprehensive contribution, at the moment the Treasury is giving no guarantee that the additional moneys will be compensated beyond 2019-20. According to Treasury analysis, the measure is expected to increase employer contributions by £1,970 million in 2019-20 and £2,005 million by 2020-21. We are not talking about a small amount of money that those bodies can easily plan for; those are huge sums of money that will really impact on the delivery of our public services. We are asking those public services to plan for the future with no real idea of what their budget will be. To assist with effective planning, if nothing else, the Government need
to come forward with information about what they will do about compensating for those additional contributions, because none of us wants to see further damage done to our public services.

My hon. Friend alluded to a further problem, namely what is happening to our universities, which are not being compensated at all for the additional contributions that they have to make. For the teachers’ pension scheme, the Treasury agreed to compensate schools and colleges—again, only for the limited period for which it is compensating everyone else, up to 2019—but not universities, which run such schemes for their lecturing staff. Furthermore, that particular problem exists only for the new universities, so apart from anything else the Government are being extremely unfair. They are singling out the post-1992 universities for particular trouble, and they are simply not looking at the huge impact on university funding.

University funding has already been affected by the freeze in tuition fees with no additional money coming through from Government, and now we have the additional pension contributions. Again, we are not talking about small amounts of money. The increase in the teachers’ pension scheme is one of 7.3% to employers, bringing their total contribution up to 23.68%. That has a massive impact on university budgets. For the civil service—while we are at it, we might as well look at this, too—there is a 6.1% increase for civil servants and a 6.22% increase for the NHS. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, that will have a huge impact on the NHS.

I am always pleased to see the Minister in his place, but given the nature of today’s debate, a Treasury Minister should have come to this Chamber to answer on behalf of the Government why they have produced additional uncertainty for all the public services, including the civil service and the NHS, by not giving them an assurance of compensation for the increased contributions. Furthermore, a number of us have been asking questions for a while about why the new universities are being treated so unfairly, and we need an explanation from the Government. That has not been forthcoming to date.

The Universities and Colleges Employers Association has said: “The proposed employer contribution increases will without doubt have a detrimental impact on universities, their staff and their students at a time of great uncertainty and we would urge the Treasury to reconsider.”

I endorse that message, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

4.49 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I will keep my speech short since, as is well known, for the last week I have been struggling to make speeches because of my sore throat. You will be pleased to know, Sir Christopher, that the House of Commons nurse recommended whisky—I will take advantage of that this evening.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhydyfelin (Gerald Jones) on securing such a vital debate.

As hon. Members have said, the employers currently in unfunded public sector pension schemes are the NHS, state schools, and the police and fire services. Any change in the discount rate would have an impact on those contributions. The UK Government announced they would fund most Departments’ additional costs incurred by the September 2018 changes for the 2019-20 year. Beyond that, Government’s position appears to be that meeting costs would form part of the spending review discussions.

The letter I referred to in my intervention on the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhynddein was from the then Welsh Government Finance Minister—now First Minister—in a joint letter with Derek Mackay, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Finance. It lays out the concerns to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. As I understand, she indicates that it is her intention to meet 100% of all costs related to the valuation of the health pensions scheme in England only. That leaves the devolved Administrations having to meet that cost, at the expense of public services. As I said, that is at variance with the UK’s Government’s statement of funding policy, which states that any measures with an impact on devolved responsibilities should have prior engagement and consultation. The fact that there was no prior engagement and consultation is of great concern to Members in the devolved nations, as it certainly should be.

It is quite clear that the public sector across the board has been hung out to dry, with little time to prepare to meet the additional costs of the revised discount rate. Hon. Members explained rather well the impact that would have on their services locally and the potential money that will have to be found to fund public services.

The potential cost to public sector jobs was a point very well made by the hon. Gentleman. I agree with her that a Treasury Minister really should have responded in this debate. With all due respect to the Minister—I do not know whether he got the short straw in a raffle—the Treasury should be here because it was a Treasury decision. That we have someone from the Home Office—with all due respect to the Minister, who I like—is somewhat baffling. Members have to hold Government Ministers to account, but we always like to have a debate with the correct Minister answering questions.

I would like public sector pension arrangements to be fully devolved to the Scottish Parliament. I am sure that colleagues in Wales, having seen this disaster, will probably share that view. There is real concern across the public sector that is shared across the board by Opposition members. I look forward to the Government’s response.

4.54 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhynddein (Gerald Jones) for securing such a vital debate.

The decision to reduce Government contributions to public sector pensions is highly flawed. I will give a short introduction to the damaging reforms, before outlining their flaws and seeking some clarifications from the Minister. The Government’s SCAPE—superannuation contributions adjusted for past experience—discount rate expresses the amount of central Government funding committed to public sector pensions. In the 2016 Budget, the Government announced that they would reduce
their contributions from 3% to 2.8%. Then, without further consultation, they announced a further 2.4% reduction to contributions. The Treasury has acknowledged that the reform is a result of the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasting lower long-term economic growth rates—in spite of that, we are told we have a booming economy.

It is vital that the reform is not mistaken as a necessity, much like the wider incorrect assertion that austerity was a necessity. The reform is the Conservatives’ ideological response to lower growth caused by their austerity programme, which incidentally took place alongside tax cuts for the very wealthy. It would seem that the country can afford tax cuts even if it cannot afford to properly fund our public service pensions—something I find really reprehensible. That policy must be understood within the Government’s wider agenda.

The effects of the reduction cannot be understated: it will mean a reliance on employers to increase their contributions to ensure public sector pensions continue to receive sufficient funding. Importantly, the Treasury has made no guarantee that additional funding will be provided beyond 2019-20 to help to compensate employers. Let us see this policy for what it is: a pay cut—yet another pay cut—for our local public services, under the guise of fiscal tinkering. The Treasury even acknowledged that in 2016, when it announced that Departments and devolved Administrations would have to foot the cost.

Although we are reassured—I am sure the Minister will reaffirm once again—that employee contributions will not be impacted, let us be completely honest: staffing costs will increase and public services will keep having to do even more with fewer resources. We hear a lot of praise for our services, especially at Christmas time, but let us remember that no one can spend a pat on the back. To clarify, the Government’s policy aims to force costly changes upon our crippled public services—although that still may cause. He may well have heard the same concerns that I have been privy to.

The fire service will be put under immense pressure if this policy is implemented. The service has suffered swingeing cuts for eight consecutive years now, and in 2017-18 employer contributions equated to 7% of English fire services’ net expenditure. Office for Budget Responsibility figures estimate that fire services across England will suffer from cuts of at least £150 million by 2023, which will be absolutely devastating for the service. I speak to firefighters, the Fire Brigades Union and councillors often; I am sure the Minister does too, so he should know full well the devastation that such cuts may cause. He may well have heard the same concerns that I have been privy to.

That sum of £150 million is the equivalent of running 33 fire stations for five years or paying the annual wage of thousands of firefighters, but alongside that, local government settlement funding for fire authorities in England is forecast to decrease by 15% between 2016-17 and 2019-20. As of March, fire and rescue authorities in England have £61.2 million in unallocated reserves. How can they be expected to pick up the bill without central Government assistance?

The situation of fire services is very worrying. We have heard Matt Wrack, who as general secretary of the FBU really ought to know what he is talking about, assert numerous times that budget cuts are putting our communities’ safety at risk. The Minister is hearing that from true experts in the field, and I do not think it can be doubted. We can see the risks of additional cuts. The Merseyside fire and rescue service has been forced to cut overnight cover at six stations. The Tyne and Wear fire service has been forced to consider new cuts in its integrated risk management plan, having already been forced to save £25 million since 2010. Surely neither would do that if they had any other choice.

I would like the Minister to explain what measures he intends to implement to cushion the blow to the fire service’s budget post 2019-20, and whether he has assessed the consequences of the pension reform on specific fire services across the UK and across different regions. Furthermore, will he undertake to implement a funding review for the fire service alongside the pensions consultation?

5.1 pm

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. As a humble foot-soldier for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden). Although I will not repeat a lot of the powerful points that Members have already raised, it is important that a crucial element is identified: the substantial financial pressure will be too much for the current budget settlements to sustain.

The current chair of the National Police Chiefs Council, Sara Thornton, raised concerns about the incurred cost on the police service. She stated that forces are organising their medium-term forecasts, which means that forces in England and Wales may need to find an extra £417 million from existing budgets by 2020-21. I find it very uncomfortable that while the Government present the narrative that they are addressing the shortage of police officers, this policy may result in the equivalent of 10,000 job losses and severe damage to the sustainability of local police forces.

The fire service will be put under immense pressure if this policy is implemented. The service has suffered swingeing cuts for eight consecutive years now, and in 2017-18 employer contributions equated to 7% of English fire services’ net expenditure. Office for Budget Responsibility figures estimate that fire services across England will suffer from cuts of at least £150 million by 2023, which will be absolutely devastating for the service. I speak to firefighters, the Fire Brigades Union and councillors often; I am sure the Minister does too, so he should know full well the devastation that such cuts may cause. He may well have heard the same concerns that I have been privy to.

That sum of £150 million is the equivalent of running 33 fire stations for five years or paying the annual wage of thousands of firefighters, but alongside that, local government settlement funding for fire authorities in England is forecast to decrease by 15% between 2016-17 and 2019-20. As of March, fire and rescue authorities in England have £61.2 million in unallocated reserves. How can they be expected to pick up the bill without central Government assistance?

The situation of fire services is very worrying. We have heard Matt Wrack, who as general secretary of the FBU really ought to know what he is talking about, assert numerous times that budget cuts are putting our communities’ safety at risk. The Minister is hearing that from true experts in the field, and I do not think it can be doubted. We can see the risks of additional cuts. The Merseyside fire and rescue service has been forced to cut overnight cover at six stations. The Tyne and Wear fire service has been forced to consider new cuts in its integrated risk management plan, having already been forced to save £25 million since 2010. Surely neither would do that if they had any other choice.

I would like the Minister to explain what measures he intends to implement to cushion the blow to the fire service’s budget post 2019-20, and whether he has assessed the consequences of the pension reform on specific fire services across the UK and across different regions. Furthermore, will he undertake to implement a funding review for the fire service alongside the pensions consultation?
in the Government, it is not for me to reason why I drew the straw for this debate. I assume it is because I am the Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, and I understood that the primary concern of the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney (Gerald Jones), as was reflected in the debate, was the impact on emergency frontline services. It is a great pleasure to respond to the debate, and I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing it. It is an important debate, because it throws a spotlight on two important issues.

The first is how we ensure that public pensions are funded in a sustainable way to protect the value of the pensions of those of our constituents who work in the public services; I know the Labour party cares about that and I would not want to give the impression that it does not. It is entirely legitimate to probe and ask questions about the impact, particularly on emergency frontline services, which we recognise on a cross-party basis are stretched and under pressure. This is an entirely legitimate debate and I welcome it.

The hon. Gentleman rightly asserted that our emergency services deserve our thanks and respect—particularly at this time of year but, frankly, every week and every month of every year—but they also deserve a decent pension, and our constituents as taxpayers deserve full reassurance about what the next CSR period will bring, reassuringly, if I continue to be Minister at that point—we are considering how best to set the framework for longer-term funding, not just for our emergency services, but also other Departments, to manage any uncertainties in terms of unexpected costs in 2019-20. I will go into some detail on that.

Quite rightly, the hon. Gentleman and others voiced concerns about what happens after 2020-21, but they will know that the fundamental truth is that at that point we will be into a new comprehensive spending review period. That is an extremely important moment in setting the framework for longer-term funding, not just for our emergency services, but for other Government Departments. I can give the hon. Gentleman my absolute assurance, if I continue to be Minister at that point—we live in uncertain times—that I am determined, as I have said publicly and as my boss the Home Secretary has said publicly, to ensure that the emergency services are properly resourced against demand and risk. That includes a need to ensure that they have the resources necessary to meet their obligations to public pensions.

The hon. Gentleman will understand that at this moment in time, no Government could give absolute reassurances about what the next CSR period will bring, but we have signalled clearly that increased employer contributions to public pensions from 2020-21 will be taken care of in the CSR. In the meantime, the Treasury has set aside £4.7 billion, which I think would seem to all our constituents to be an extremely large number, to help Departments cover unforeseen additional costs in 2019-20. I will go into some detail on the areas of my direct responsibility, police and fire, because concerns have been expressed about people in those services from both sides of the Chamber.

Before I address those concerns, I acknowledge an important point made both by the hon. Gentleman and by the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) about concerns within the community of universities. That is not my area of direct responsibility or expertise, but I undertake to write to the new Universities Minister on their behalf to highlight the concerns expressed in the debate and to ask him to respond to the hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney in the light of those concerns.

To give a bit of context, the Government—I am sure with cross-party support—want to make sure that public sector pensions remain among the best pensions available, especially for police officers and firefighters, in recognition of their role. We are determined, as any Government would be, to make sure that the cost of providing pensions is fair to the scheme’s members, the employers and taxpayers. I think any Government would take the same approach. We want to be sure that they remain affordable and sustainable for generations to come. That is the context of the changes announced to the discount rate at the Budgets in 2016 and 2018. As the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) said, they were based on the latest independent Office for Budget Responsibility projections of GDP growth.

The changes to the discount rate have resulted in an increase to public sector employers’ contributions to their pension schemes, including the police and firefighters’ schemes. The hon. Lady was quite right that the intention was not to increase the members’ contribution rate. I confirm that that is not being contemplated. It is an increase in employers’ contributions. Critically to the point of this debate, the Government have provided financial support for additional pension costs that could be reasonably expected to be unexpected. The extra funding is £98 million for fire in 2019-20 and £153 million for the police. As I have said before, funding levels for future years will be considered as part of the spending review. That is inevitable, given where we are in the funding cycle for Departments.

A lot of concern was expressed on behalf of both the services. I know the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) said, they were aware of the police funding settlement that I proposed last week, although obviously it has not been passed by Parliament. That recognised the additional pension costs to the police. He mentioned a number of more than £400 million. Actually, in 2019-20, the additional costs to the police system would be approximately £330 million. He will be aware that the overall police funding settlement enables up to £970 million of additional investment in our police, although that depends very much on what individual police and crime commissioners do on the precept.

The hon. Gentleman also talked about Gwent police, which I know partly covers his constituency. The funding settlement enables additional public investment of up
to £8.5 million in Gwent police, which faces pensions pressures of £2.9 million. He will be aware, because he will have heard me bang on about it, that Gwent police is an outlier, with £56 million in reserves—more than 45.3% of its total funding. Those reserves have increased since 2011.

I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that the provisional police funding settlement, which is yet to be ratified by Parliament—I hope he will support it—goes well beyond meeting the specific additional pension costs and tries to support police forces both with their cost pressures and in their ambitions to increase capacity. That is part of a broader funding settlement that proposes a substantial increase of up to £970 million in the police system, compared with additional pension costs of £330 million.

I should also note that the police funding settlement talks about a word that never comes up in these conversations, but that is important for all our constituents, who ultimately pay for all this through their taxes: efficiency. The shadow Minister views austerity as ideological but, after eight years of austerity, that we can still sit down with our police leaders and agree £120 million of further cost savings through smarter procurement—they are spending our constituents’ money—tells us that we are still not at the end of the journey of making sure that our public services are efficient. Where the police lead, the fire service will undoubtedly follow, not least as they are both under the guidance of Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services.

**Gerald Jones:** We have had eight years of austerity. I come from a local authority background myself, and identifying efficiencies at first is relatively straightforward, but it gets more difficult over time. The Minister mentions reserves, and I know that some areas have reserves. However, there is a big difference between reserves earmarked for certain projects, which all local authorities, police authorities and others have, and undisclosed reserves, which are much lower for many organisations. The point about reserves is that, once they are spent, they are gone. They are there for a rainy day; they cannot be used as part of a recurring budget. It is unfair for recurring expenditure to fall on council tax payers to an even greater level than it does already.

**Mr Hurd:** I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point and I absolutely respect his local authority experience. I am certainly not in denial about the financial pressures, particularly on our police system but also on certain fire services as well. He is right that, in the early years of needing to get back to living within our means and controlling public expenditure, some fruit was easier to pick than others, and it gets harder. However, I was making the point that we are talking about £120 million of savings agreed by the police—this is not a Home Office number—over the next two years through collective procurement. That is just smart buying.

The hon. Gentleman will know very well, and it is the same for the fire service, that a fragmented system of more than 40 different forces each doing their own thing—buying helmets, uniforms and equipment independently—is not necessarily the most efficient route to getting the best value for our constituents. All I am saying is that, even after eight years of tightening and reducing budgets, we can still find £120 million left on the table because of inefficient procurement practices. I hope he welcomes that. That money was effectively being wasted and can be better used for frontline service delivery. I hope he agrees.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Hurd:** I will be delighted to give way to the hon. Lady. I have very happy memories of her shadowing me very effectively many years back.

**Dr Blackman-Woods:** I thank the Minister for those comments. I accept his point about efficiencies. However, we are really talking about the overall size of the cake. The police force and the fire authority in Durham have already significantly reduced in size since 2010, to the point that they struggle to run an effective service. We can talk about procurement and efficiencies, but the pressure on our public services is enormous. That has to be the starting point of these discussions.

**Mr Hurd:** I have the greatest respect for the hon. Lady and I absolutely understand the point she makes. She will not have followed all my public utterances over the last two years or for however long I have been in this role, but I acknowledged right from the start, after listening to the police and fire services, that the frontlines of our emergency services are stretched. I have said so publicly. The actions I have taken through the police funding settlements last year and this year demonstrate, frankly, a move from cuts to increased investment, in direct response to conversations I have had, not least those with frontline officers expressing their frustration about how stretched they are. I absolutely accept that point.

Of course, £120 million, in the context of the £970 million funding settlement, is still at the margin, but the central point is that we cannot give up pushing those who spend public money to demonstrate that they spend it in the most effective way. It is not Government money; it is our constituents’ money. They pay it in taxes and expect it to be used properly. We will not let up on that, because £1 saved through smarter procurement is £1 that can be used for more effective frontline delivery.

I will talk about the implications for the fire service, because that was the main thrust of the shadow Minister’s points. I reassure her that, as we work towards the next comprehensive spending review, the Home Office will do a similar exercise to that which we have done with the police—I will be leading this—to genuinely try to understand the demand on the system, both in terms of the demand on the core statutory duty and also the financial pressures that the system is under. We will ask tough questions on efficiency, the use of reserves and all the things that we debate, but we only do so because we are ultimately stewards of public money—it is not Government money, it is taxpayers’ money—and that is our job. I am absolutely determined, through the CSR, to make sure that both the police and the fire service have the resources they need. I have shown through my words, and more importantly through my actions, that we have responded to those messages about genuine stretch and pressure on the frontline.

In 2019-20, single-purpose fire and rescue authorities will see an increase in core spending power of 2.3% in cash terms. The additional employer pension costs for
the fire service will be an additional £10 million in 2019-20. The Government will cover the rest of the increase by providing an additional pension grant of £98 million. Standalone fire and rescue authorities, excluding Manchester, will be able to raise an additional £38 million in 2019-20 if all fire and rescue authorities increase the precept by 3%. We believe that will allow fire authorities to meet their financial pressures and continue to invest in key capabilities.

In addition, fire and rescue authorities hold significant financial reserves, which have increased—this is the point—by over 80% to £545 million between the end of March 2011 and the end of March 2018, which is equivalent to 42% of their core spending power. I will always refer to that, because there needs to be proper transparency and accountability.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), who is no longer in her place, talked about the pressures on South Yorkshire. Again, its core spending power increased by 1.7%. It sits on reserves worth almost 50% of its core spending power, and those reserves have increased by £9.5 million since March 2011. Like most fire authorities, it is starting out on the road to independent inspection and it is, I understand, in tranche 3 and will be inspected in summer 2019. One of the things it will be inspected on is efficiency. It will be interesting to see how it comes out of that inspection.

In relation to the police, I genuinely believe that the combination of the specific pension grant, the increase in the Home Office grant, the efficiency savings that we have agreed to realise, the high level of reserves that still remain in the system and a financial settlement that enables increased investment of up to £970 million in 2019-20, if fully realised—it does depend on the actions of police and crime commissioners—will mean that as a country we will invest over £2 billion more in 2019-20 than we did in 2015-16. While Labour MPs continue to make comparisons to 2010, the reality is that since 2015, the Government have recognised that the demand on the police system has risen and become more complex, and we have responded with additional public investment.

Finally, I hope that I have reassured hon. Members that the Government are working closely with both the policing and fire sectors, to ensure that they have the resources to enable them to do their challenging work efficiently and effectively. Alongside that, we are taking steps to ensure that the future funding of public pensions is affordable, sustainable and well balanced.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the reduction in Government contributions to public service pensions.

5.22 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I thank you for allowing me the honour of firing off on this debate this afternoon, on the last day before the festive break.

As Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, I should explain to hon. Members why we are here in Westminster Hall, as they will be used to this kind of debate taking place in the main Chamber. Having not had any time from the Government for eight weeks, and not having any assurances that we would get any at all, the Backbench Business Committee decided to hold this debate here to ensure that it took place. We knew that this slot was available about three weeks ago, and it was only last week that we found that we would get time in the main Chamber today, and we already had queues of debates waiting to take up that time.

It may be a Christmas carol to some Members’ ears that I do not intend to use my contribution to discuss the intricacies of the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union. Instead, I hope once again to illuminate the Commons with tales from the frozen wastes of the north, and in particular from my constituency of Gateshead.

Gateshead is a wonderful place, as I am sure Members from all sides of the House would agree. It has actually hosted Conservative party spring conferences, and Conservative party members have enjoyed themselves in Gateshead. They were very welcome, although they have not come back recently.

We have much to be proud of—our angel of the north, our Quayside development, the Baltic, the Sage Gateshead regional music centre and our Gateshead Millennium Bridge that connects us to that village on the north side of the River Tyne, which I believe is called Newcastle. Then there is our town centre redevelopment, which has dramatically increased footfall, our sports stadium, once renowned for hosting major national and international athletics events, our Metrocentre, and our wonderful municipal Victorian park, Saltwell Park. And we have great people, who have genuine generosity of spirit and Geordie warmth. I could go on at length about the great things that Gateshead has to offer, but I feel, sadly, a bit like a scratched record.

Having had the honour of chairing the Backbench Business Committee since 2015, I have participated in a number of these debates, and I do not want to repeat much of what I have said before about Gateshead.

Although it is always fantastic to have the opportunity to talk about the many great things happening in Gateshead, I am afraid to say that, for the last eight and a half years, they have happened through the prism of austerity. My local authority has lost well over £100 million per annum in annual revenue since 2010, and that has made life very difficult for many of the poorest people living in my constituency. That is set against the backdrop of a significant year-on-year increase in demand for services, which is partly due to the growth in population. Perhaps more concerning is the significant growth in demand for services to meet the increasing needs in our community.

Adult social care demand is well up, and children’s social care demand is increasing exponentially. There is no doubt that policies enacted by this and previous Governments have been driving down living standards and increasing the demand for social care services.

We are all well aware of the health benefits of preventive care, as well as the significant reduction in later costs if those preventive care measures are in place. However, in the north-east—an area with historically lower than average life expectancy—constituents have been pushed to breaking point and beyond by failing welfare reform policies, such as universal credit and personal independence payments. In addition, local authority provision has been pared back to such an extent that often some of those who are most in need still miss out.

It is all well and good for the Prime Minister to decry the end of austerity, but the reality do not match the rhetoric. Gateshead, my own local authority, faces a funding gap in the next financial year of a further £29.2 million, rising to £76.7 million by the year 2022-23 and 2023-24. Withdrawing the revenue support grant to local authorities is a policy decision that the Government are entitled to make, but to do that without reforming the council tax system for collecting local revenue is reckless, bordering on criminal.

It means that the two sides of the equation do not add up.

To put it in simple terms, when council tax was brought in in the early 1990s, everyone breathed a sigh of relief, because it meant the end of the community charge—the poll tax. Here we are, 28 years later. The council tax system was brought in with bands A to H, with band D as the median, and it was fine for a time.

Once the revenue support grant is withdrawn, however, without rectifying the council tax banding system, a local authority such as mine where 65% of all the properties are band A cannot raise enough revenue to meet the needs of the community that it serves.

It is well documented that there is a correlation between cuts to preventive work and increased costs further down the line. The Government continue to give out platitudes and soundbites while constituents of hon. Members across the House have nowhere else to go. The Government talk about parity of esteem for mental health and physical health, while cutting back on funding to the NHS for public health programmes and cutting local authority budgets—the 12 local authorities in north-east England will lose a combined £190 million from their public health budget, which is there to provide preventive health programmes. The Government talk about helping people into work, while leaving many of my constituents with no more than £190 per month to pay their utility bills and to feed themselves. Many of my constituents are left with £45 a week to live on.
Last week, I met a very severely disabled lady called Anna, who I first met four or five years ago. She is confined to a wheelchair and has had the mobility element in her benefits payments reduced. At the same time, she faces significantly increased charges for her daily care packages, because she requires round-the-clock care. She now does not have enough money to get out of the house more than once a week. It is sad, in the 21st century, that one of the most vulnerable people living in Gateshead—an intelligent woman, confined to a wheelchair—is not able to get out of the house more than once a week because of the constraints on her finances. The care packages that she pays for are sometimes nothing more than 15-minute flying visits.

The Government talk about solving the homelessness crisis, but they sit by while the right-to-buy programme continues to take the best stock out of our social housing. They talk about protecting private landlords and their tenants, but they model housing payments in universal credit on local authority allowance rates, not on the realities of real-world rental payments. They talk about opportunity for all, while fragmenting the education system so badly that a private academy trust operating in my local authority is closing a school of which I was chair of governors, having so badly mismanaged it over the past five years—and having seen the pupil population fall from 700 to 200—that they can no longer afford to keep it open. Schools face a recruitment and retention crisis, and a funding crisis, while increasingly being expected to rectify the social ills inflicted on their children by austerity.

I am interested in this sort of stuff, because I am a member of the Select Committee on Education and I am still chair of governors of a primary school in the centre of Gateshead, where 34 different languages are spoken by the pupil population. It is a poor community. That poor community, and those children, have seen a whole combination of things inflicted on them over the last eight and a half years—not just by the Department for Education but by a whole range of Government Departments—that have had a quite catastrophic effect on their lives.

We have had cuts over the years. First and foremost, one of the early ones was to something that affected children before they were born. We used to give health and maternity grants in this country to ensure that mothers conducted their lives in a healthy way during pregnancy, but they were cut. Hundreds of Sure Start centres have either closed or had their services curtailed. The previous Government were going to roll out a pilot project called ContactPoint to track children and ensure that no child fell through the cracks in the system. It came about because of cases such as that of Victoria Climbié, but it was abolished by the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove).

The play strategy, which was developed to ensure that we had fit playing environments in our communities, was abolished. A programme called “Play Builder”, which was designed to renew local authority municipal play equipment, was gone. The “Creative Partnerships” scheme, which was about cultural enrichment in our secondary schools, was abolished. School sport partnerships had two thirds of their funding taken away. Aimhigher, a programme aimed at getting youngsters from the most deprived communities into university, was also abolished. Then education maintenance allowances went. The careers information, advice and guidance service went. Our youth and community services have been decimated. Add to that the cuts in local authority and welfare benefits.

All of this put together has had a devastating impact on some of the poorest children in our communities. The Government talk about making the welfare benefit system simple while cutting local authority funding, which has traditionally been the backbone of support for voluntary sector organisations. These sorts of services are invaluable when it comes to assisting people in difficulty. It is all talk, and from my perspective, as someone who represents Gateshead, I am afraid it always has been.

I said at the outset that I would not talk about Brexit, but how can I not? Some 57% of my constituency voted to leave, but that came after six years of Government austerity. Many of the social problems that have been identified brought about a situation whereby I would say to people on their doorsteps, “Look, we’ve got to remain in the European Union, or things will get much worse.” Some of my constituents would say, “Worse? What, worse than this?” and they meant it. We face poverty, homelessness, low pay and unemployment.

Before Government Members talk about their jobs miracle, let me say that the number of unemployed people in my constituency is 1,020 higher than it was in the same month last year, and the figure for youth unemployment is now more than 650. Those things were all caused by the Government’s policies, with little or no regard for massive regional variations or the widening north-south divide. Unfortunately, however we exit the EU, those problems will remain. It is shameful, frankly, for a so-called modern and prosperous country that the United Nations had to send a rapporteur to look at the effects of welfare reform on places such as mine in the north-east of England. It is equally shameful that Members from the governing party saw fit to grab food bank selfies earlier this month. I support the food bank in Gateshead, but I wish it did not have to exist. Given that it does exist and is needed, I will support it, but I work for the day when we do not need it any more.

Although people across the country who volunteer in food banks should be commended, it is a disgrace that millions of our constituents have to rely on donations for food. Although I wish every Member of the House and all staff a very happy, peaceful and restful Christmas, it is a time for reflection more than a time for celebration. I sincerely hope that Members across the House will spend some time over this festive period reflecting on how their choices in the voting Lobbies are directly affecting people in our communities, who are unable to enjoy this time of year as much as we would want them to. I wish everyone all the very best.

1.44 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Before the House adjourns for the Christmas recess, there are a number of points that I wish to raise. I will not sulk at this wonderful debate being downgraded—some might say—to Westminster Hall. It is not quite like having it in the Chamber; it is cosy and intimate, and we will just have to see how it develops.

I recently met Chris Green, director of the Summer Camps Trust. Thousands of children benefit every year from the experience of summer camp, learning new
skills, meeting new friends and enjoying the countryside. Many young people are also trained to be team leaders, giving them valuable skills for the future. I urge the Government to look into the wider provision of summer camps.

My local football team, Southend United, have broken their losing run. I am glad to say that, under their excellent owner and manager, we are now looking perhaps to reach the play-offs and have a stadium. I visited them in August, when they hosted the Community and Education Trust, which involved three teams of young people who were planning a social action project. I commend the National Citizen Service for providing opportunities for young people to give something back to the community in which they live.

Earlier this year I visited Heycroft Primary, an excellent local school, for a fundraising event in aid of mental health charities Young Minds and Mind. The wonderful organiser, Kelly Swain, educated herself about self-help wellbeing therapies, and her aim is to make a difference to families who suffer from mental health issues. The day was a great success, and I look forward to working with her in the future.

My constituent Mark Rice recently drove over a faulty manhole cover and sustained significant damage to his car. Apparently the local council are not responsible for this, and neither is the water company. So who is responsible for this? Mr Rice has had to pay for the repairs, and he is rightly concerned that this will affect his future insurance premiums. I encourage the Government and the water company to look into this case and see if we can get an answer.

Another of my constituents, Ms Pauline Morris, recently met me to discuss non-invasive prenatal testing. Such a test can provide the parents with indicators on the presence of Down’s syndrome. I thought that the usual amniocentesis test was enough, but apparently it is not any more. Too many women have to go through the old-style test, which can, depending on the results, necessitate further and potentially dangerous tests. The solution is non-invasive prenatal testing. The chairman of the Southend clinical commissioning group has informed me that the test will be rolled out over three years. That is not soon enough, and I call again on the Government to see whether they can speed up this non-invasive testing.

A Southend lady called Sue Lesser launched a book called “Take a Poem with Breakfast”. The collection, written by her, is dedicated to all people living with dementia—it is really in honour of her mother, who suffers from it—and any profit will go to the Alzheimer’s Society. I hope that she sells out of copies of her book.

I spoke in a recent debate in Westminster Hall, when it was a pleasure for me to congratulate all the staff and volunteers at Southend University Hospital on the wonderful work they do. Del and Lindsay Rudd contacted me earlier this year to tell me about their personal experiences. I was not surprised to learn that the renal unit is, in the words of Del and Lindsay, “a credit to the Hospital, the Town and the NHS.”

I could not agree more. Another constituent, Helen Prince, came to my surgery. She is an ambassador for the 70/30 Campaign, which is working towards a 70% reduction in child abuse and neglect by 2030. As a parent myself, I absolutely support her campaign and I hope that everyone in the House will sign up to it as well.

I have been trying to get some answers on behalf of my constituent, Carolyn Mason. Anyone can set up an employment agency—indeed, I used to run one before I became a Member of Parliament. I think the regulations are too lax at the moment. Ms Mason is a reputable owner, but there is some sharp practice going on in the industry generally.

Last week I asked the Leader of the House for a debate on the stress and anxiety caused by scam telephone calls and emails. All of us, as Members of Parliament, receive them all the time. Sadly, my constituent Ben Giles recently lost half of his savings as a result of such a call—this is a highly intelligent gentleman. I cannot stress enough the importance of stopping this wicked practice.

I dread to think how many accidents happen when pedestrians cross busy roads. Another constituent, Cliff Short, is better placed than most to comment on the situation, as he has been a police officer and a taxi driver for some 30 years. After identifying zebra crossings as a point of danger—extraordinarily—Mr Short created “red zebra”. When pedestrians approach a crossing, the flashing beacon switches from yellow to red, alerting drivers of the presence of a pedestrian. It is a simple but potentially life-saving idea, so I hope the Department for Transport will look at it.

I am proud to be the president of the Leigh Orpheus male voice choir, which sang in the Palace of Westminster earlier this year. This is its 50th anniversary.

Recently, a number of my Essex colleagues went on a boat trip down the River Thames. A number of people might say that it was a pity it did not sink, but we successfully negotiated the way from Tilbury to Southend pier. The trip was to support Essex Port of London Authority, to learn more about planned infrastructure projects, and to look at the Thames crossing and a potential new Thames barrier. We heard about opportunities for the expansion of the port of Tilbury and the benefits to the economies of both Essex and Kent. I support both those projects. Essex PLA is looking at providing a commuter service from the end of Southend pier into the City of London.

Hippo Cabs is a wonderful organisation that ensures that elderly residents who are disabled actually have a life. It offers a first-class service. I very much support Mr and Mrs Biswas, who run that wonderful service.

We yet again had our annual centenarian tea party in October. I have worked out that, in 34 years, I will qualify for one myself if I am around then. It would perhaps be unique for a Member of Parliament to do that. The pupils of Westcliff High School for Boys did a splendid job of engaging with those centenarians.

At long last, at Fair Havens, our wonderful new hospice, we had a sod-turning ceremony in October. We are about £850,000 short, but it will be opened in February 2020.

Like the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), Southend had a visit from the Taiwanese ambassador recently. It was a wonderful visit, and he said that he enjoyed it more than Cleethorpes. [Laughter.] He didn't actually. He was shown the Forum,
the Focal Point gallery, South Essex College and Ventrica, a local company. I hope there will be some trading opportunities opened up into the future.

We have a wonderful jazz centre in Southend. Digby Fairweather welcomed Sir Michael Parkinson to open it. I hope that people throughout the United Kingdom and the wider world will visit it.

Last month, I visited the local watch station of the National Coastwatch Institution, which provides a vital service in monitoring the coastal waters and keeping watch for emergencies such as overturned boats or fishermen in trouble—I do not know whether it would have helped the Essex Members if our boat turned over. Other activities such as surfing, diving and canoeing are also monitored. We should not take its service for granted.

We had a wonderful active ageing day in Southend. It reinforced the idea that if people keep active as they age, they will live longer.

Earlier, the House paid tribute to Les and his two colleagues, who have a combined 120 years of service to this House—absolutely fantastic. We are very grateful to all the people who help us go about our business in the House. They are wonderful.

I recently hosted a reception for the National Association of Boys and Girls Clubs. I was once patron of Basildon Boys Club, which does a fantastic job. Belonging to a club gives young people a great start in life, a place to go, things to do, and helps them develop positive relationships, so I really do commend them.

This November was complex regional pain syndrome awareness month. I met the charity Burning Nights and CRPS patients to hear about what more can be done to support those living with the painful condition. We laugh about people who have got a back problem, but it is not very funny to have one. The problem cannot be seen. In the UK, an estimated 15,000 people are diagnosed with the condition each year. There is some lack of awareness among GPs and others, so we need to do more to raise awareness about it.

I have been honoured to be the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis. I would like to give a special mention to a local constituent, Carla Cressy, who has been instrumental in forming the group, which has a wonderful make-up. Through her charity, she has been campaigning for greater support for the 1.5 million women in the UK living with that dreadful condition. Raising awareness of endometriosis in schools and among healthcare professionals and employers is critical to ensuring patients get the right treatment and support. I look forward to the meeting next month with the Under-Secretary.

We were all invited to the reception in the House of Commons organised by the British Toy and Hobby Association, which does a very good job in raising awareness of unsafe and dangerous toys. Local charities in Southend were very grateful for the toys it donated.

Hollie Gemmell is a parish nurse and fitness consultant in Southend. She organises dance shows designed to help the elderly reminisce, exercise and have fun. Her shows are very popular. She really does a wonderful job for elderly people.

Last week, Southend Borough Council approved ambitious plans for building an exciting and prosperous future for the town. Looking forward to 2050, the plans set out a vision for Southend that will create a place to live, work and visit that we can all be proud of. It includes investment in our roads, regeneration for our High Street, which my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) mentioned this morning, and open spaces to help us flourish as a digital city. I welcome this opportunity.

I make no apology for thinking that it is obviously an oversight that Southend is not already a city. I will not desist from raising this issue in the House at every opportunity until we become a city.

In the Amess household on 25 December, the word “Brexit” is banned. Every time I leave my house, someone stops me and wants to talk about Brexit. When I go shopping, everyone wants to talk about Brexit. When I am on the train, they want to talk about Brexit. I am sick to death of hearing the word “Brexit”, so on 25 December, it will not be mentioned in our house. Regardless of what the House decides, I will be leaving the European Union at 11 o’clock on 29 March next year. I wish all colleagues a very happy Christmas and a healthy and prosperous new year.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I call Siobhain McDonagh.

1.57 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Hanson. I was expecting to come a little further down the list, but I am delighted to be called so early.

It is something of a relief to be attending a debate with time for issues other than the B word—although we are all mentioning it. Although Brexit has been all-consuming of the Government’s time, energy and actions, the day-to-day reality for my constituents and those outside the Westminster bubble is quite different. There are 130,000 children who will wake up on Christmas morning without a permanent place to call home. My local accident and emergency unit is so full that my constituents have been left queuing outside it in the cold. The pressure on our police means that antisocial behaviour is running rife in my local town centre—an area crying out for more bobbies on the beat. Although the Government have found billions of pounds for contingency planning for a no-deal Brexit, our vital public services teeter ever closer to breaking point.

I want to use my time today to bring to hon. Members’ attention three of the issues most important to my constituents. Let me start with housing. A year ago to the day, I spoke in this debate about the homelessness crisis across the country. I have reread my speech, and it is disheartening that every single word is still applicable one year on. In fact, if anything, the situation is now worse. Some 80,000 households across England will spend this Christmas trapped in temporary accommodation. Last year, I brought to Parliament’s attention the 86 homeless families in my constituency housed in a converted warehouse in the heart of one of south London’s busiest working industrial estates. One year on, many of those families are preparing for yet another Christmas in that so-called temporary limbo. They do not have the facilities to cook a Christmas dinner. They
have no space for a Christmas tree, with families of up to five people sharing a single room, and there is little chance of presents, with every penny possible set aside to save for the extortionate deposit that may one day provide the golden ticket needed for the private rented sector. How many more families must be trapped in this limbo before the Government make absolute priorities of tackling homelessness and building the social housing and genuinely affordable homes for which we are so desperate?

The second issue is universal credit, which has been at the forefront of debate over recent months. For my constituents, the botched roll-out of the supposed flagship reform of the benefits system has undoubtedly caused chaos and misery. Take my constituent Mrs D, who wrote to me earlier this week and said:

“Universal credit has been a complete shambles for my family. We’ve explained to the children that Santa won’t deliver much this year and that there won’t be a Christmas dinner. Universal credit doesn’t make work pay, it puts you in debt.”

Another constituent of mine, Mrs L, was made redundant last year after 10 years working as a school administrator. Since January, she has worked on an agency basis for an employment agency. Universal credit assesses a person’s circumstances within a set monthly assessment period, however, so the dates of their universal credit claim and monthly pay packet are of paramount importance. For Mrs L, that has proven to be a nightmare. She anticipated a payment on 22 November, but was not paid until 18 December and, for the first time in her whole working life, she finds herself in rent arrears. She is now so worried about the irregularity of her payments that she questions whether it is in her financial interest to work for the agency. That makes a mockery of the idea that the system helps people to get into work. How much longer will the Government stand idly by while the least well-off continue to fall through the broken net of universal credit?

I will use my remaining time on a more positive note, to highlight a quite different organisation in my constituency, which is changing the lives of so many young, vulnerable constituents. The WISH Centre is a charity that prevents self-harm, and offers a community-based model that provides therapy and counselling in schools and at the centre. Over recent months, the Centre for Mental Health conducted an evaluation of the WISH Centre. The results were outstanding and worthy of being brought to the attention of the Chamber.

The report found that an extraordinary 81% of young people who have been helped by the WISH Centre have either significantly reduced their self-harm, or have stopped altogether. The young people themselves describe the project as holistic; it focuses on their strengths and builds resilience at each individual’s own pace. The report highlights the relief brought to sufferers, parents, carers and teachers, and evidences cost savings in both clinical commissioning groups and authorities across England. Fortunately, the WISH Centre is actively looking to share its methodologies more widely, and I will happily introduce any hon. or right hon. Member to the scheme, if they would like more information.

With the Government trapped in Brexit turmoil, I sincerely hope that the Christmas period will bring them time to reflect on the day-to-day reality of those who I have described.

“People just walk past us and they are supposed to be going into that building to change the world that we live in.”

Those are the words of Jamie Leigh, who has been sleeping rough outside the gates of the Parliamentary Estate. I sincerely hope that the Government offer her more hope in 2019.

2.4 pm

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I too was expecting to come later in the order of speeches—Christmas has come early for me. Happy Christmas to everyone, and thank you to all the staff who run this place. I have said that now, so I will not repeat it.

I want to raise the subject of the danger caused by a drug called isotretinoin, which I have already spoken about—perhaps four times—in the House since becoming an MP. To date, I have to say, the collective view of the House has had little impact on actually sorting it out. Isotretinoin, also known as Accutane or Roaccutane, is a drug used to treat severe acne primarily in teenagers—mainly boys. It has dramatic effects: it clears acne up pretty quickly, but its side-effects can be enormous. It can cause severe depression and impotence in those who use it.

My concerns stem from contact with constituents, particularly one lady. She is the mother of a young man who has suffered enormously from isotretinoin. At the age of 16, he was given the drug for eight months. As a result, he suffered—forgive my language—complete erectile dysfunction, which has had a life-changing effect on him and, indeed, on his mental state. He is now in his early 20s, and it has of course had a dramatic effect on him. He has been through university, too.

Unsurprisingly, his mother is distraught, in particular because her son is now almost unwilling even to discuss the matter. I believe that we can all understand that. It must be very difficult for a young man to discuss such a matter with his mother. I, personally—I know I am from another generation—could not even have dreamt of talking about such a matter with my mother. I am really pleased that things have moved on, but I can still see the real difficulty for young men who have to discuss or bring up such matters.

I gather that there is an impact on young women, too: they can suffer a lack of libido. It is certainly considered a pretty dangerous prescription for a young pregnant woman, and doctors are careful about prescribing it if there is any chance that a young woman is pregnant. Pregnancy, however, can come as a pretty big surprise—it certainly has in my life and in my family. There is no fail-safe. [Laughter.] Hon. Members may laugh, but we have all been there, have we not?

Isotretinoin can work very well, but for a small percentage of people, when it strikes, it has devastating effects. There is now well-documented evidence that it leads to suicide. I have brought those cases up when I have spoken about the matter before, but I do not intend to repeat them. Suffice to say, I am pretty sure that there is a direct link between the use of isotretinoin and some suicides.

If someone is depressed and feels that their life is over and that they are finished, they give up the will to live, which I have seen in some soldiers. I have seen a soldier who, when told of his injuries, said—forgive my language—“Oh, shit,” and he died, right there and then. I am quite sure that that could be the case for young men and women—particularly young men—in this situation.
I know that isotretinoin is a miracle drug for some—my daughter tells me that a lot of her friends use it—but for that small percentage of people who are deeply affected by it, causing problems such as depression and erectile dysfunction, it is devastating. Medical professionals warn people about the drug, and are careful about prescribing it, but I wonder whether, in view of the risks that we do not know about, we should be prescribing it at all.

I checked to see whether I personally could get hold of isotretinoin pills, and do so with relative ease and without a prescription. Of course, I used the internet. I did that yesterday. In this country, obviously, a prescription is required, but not so for companies based abroad. For example, a Canadian company called Online Pharmacy came up almost immediately. It offers Accutane—the same thing—and 10 pills cost £49.24. Delivery by air costs about £11.24, although I do not understand why that is quite so expensive from Canada to the UK, and apparently takes two to four weeks—I did not realise stuff would take that long to get across the Atlantic by air. The parcel, when it arrives, has discreet packaging so that no one knows what it contains—I am thinking of teenagers here, hiding it from the parents. It worries me, obviously that our teenagers—I still have two—can simply order this stuff and receive it, while parents have no idea. Incidentally, Online Pharmacy also promised to provide two free Viagra tablets, which is somewhat darkly ironic considering the problems I am talking about.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency—our regulator, on this side of the Atlantic—issues warnings to healthcare professionals on the risks, such as in October 2017, but nothing more instructive than that. The agency has declared that the matter is being closely monitored but, considering the anecdotal evidence and what are to me the clear problems caused for a small percentage of people who use it, that is not good enough. As I mentioned, there have now been four debates in Parliament in which Members on both sides of the House have expressed concern, and so I suppose I am representing them all today. I bring it up again because we had this debate in Westminster Hall about six months or so ago, and I want it to be kept to the forefront. I represent all parts of the House when I speak today.

Surely it is time for the Department of Health to establish a major investigation into this drug and, perhaps as a precaution, to order that prescribing it should be halted until we are absolutely certain that we can at least identify those people at risk, or mitigate those risks much more than we can now. I am sorry to raise such a difficult problem, but I do so only because, on behalf of all Members of the House, I think that we should continue to press for this matter to have a proper investigation by the Department. I wish everyone to warn people about the drug, and are careful about prescribing it, but I wonder whether, in view of the risks, that we do not know about, we should be prescribing it at all.

2.15 pm

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart), whom I have got to know quite well through serving together on the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs. He brought a very important matter to the House’s attention with his characteristic compassion and worldly-wise experience.

There have already been several good speeches. I fear that the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) is leaving, but his was a tour de force, a lesson to us all. I understand that in Southend, his Christmas address to the nation is viewed much as the state of the union speech is seen in the United States. I cannot possibly comment on all the matters mentioned, so I will refer to one, which was the rise of Southend United—Bradford City are in the same division. They are beginning to win games, and I note that our fixture at Valley Parade against Southend is on 19 January. The hon. Gentleman will be most welcome if he can escape from Southend for the weekend.

I intend to put three matters before the House. On the sporting theme, I will discuss Keighley Cougars, the rugby league team in Keighley. At this time of year, many of us visit primary schools, whether as the local MP, or as a parent or grandparent, and I will discuss one school in particular which has been improving over the past few months, Oldfield Primary School. Then I want to bring to the attention of the House a couple of early-day motions that might have passed people by.

First, I will talk about Keighley Cougars. Since the 1950s, this is the 20th occasion on which Keighley rugby league has been mentioned in this House. It was first mentioned by one of my illustrious predecessors, Mr Hobson, in the 1950s when he described Keighley rugby league club as one of the 30 “big fish” professional clubs at the time. I will not go through all 19 references, but it would be remiss of me not to mention Mr Gary Walker, who sadly passed away shortly after I returned to the House last year. One of my first duties was to pay tribute to him. He was very much involved in Keighley rugby league at its height in recent times—it was called “Cougar-mania”, in the 1990s.

Before the Super League, the Keighley Cougars were the first team to bring a bit of razzmatazz to rugby league. They went up the divisions and, in April 1995, they were leading division two and looking forward to promotion to the top division. What happened? They had three games to go, and they were told by the emerging Super League that they were not good enough for it: London and Paris—can you believe it, Mr Hanson—would be in the Super League, but not Keighley Cougars.

The Keighley Cougars did much good in the town. We have heard about local organisations doing good in their towns, notably from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) is leaving, but his was a tour de force, a lesson to us all. I understand that in Southend, his Christmas...
for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh). When Keighley Cougars were at their height in the 1990s, crime actually fell in the town by about 15%, because people had something to believe in and the youngsters had something to get involved in.

I will not rehearse the history since that period, but it has been difficult, now reaching its nadir. Over the summer, the club was taken over by Austria Holdings. The controlling force, one might say, behind Austria Holdings is Mr Shane Spencer. The rugby league did not judge him to be a fit and proper person to run Keighley Cougars so someone else held the licence.

On 11 December, Austria Holdings gave up control of Keighley Cougars (2010) Ltd. According to Companies House, Mrs Claire Auty took 75% control over Keighley Cougars. Keighley Cougars is still in special measures with the rugby league, which will not let it sign contracted players for the new season, only months away. It is a very suspicious situation because the day afterwards, there were bankruptcy proceedings against the said Mr Shane Spencer in Wakefield court, which have been adjourned until 4 January. Keighley Cougars fans are deeply worried. I have called upon Mr Shane Spencer to stand aside; we do not know who Mrs Claire Auty is and she has made no statement as far as I am aware of what she intends to do with Keighley Cougars. We need new ownership.

I looked back at all those references to Keighley Cougars and Keighley rugby league in Hansard; many are about conflict between rugby union and rugby league, and how rugby league felt it was not getting a good deal down the decades. I can announce that Keighley RUFC, chaired by Mr Graeme Sheffield, has confirmed that it is quite happy to ground share with Keighley Cougars next season. There are a couple of consortia that will come to the fore—I understand the rugby league has had at least two approaches.

It is incumbent on the rugby league, particularly after those bankruptcy proceedings on 4 January, to take firm action—it has the powers to do that—and to issue the licence for Keighley Cougars to another more secure and presentable group of individuals, hopefully with a supporters’ trust so that Keighley Cougars can rise once again. It is on a terrific site—the cricket club is next door; Steeton AFC now play at Keighley Cougars. It could be part of the regeneration of Keighley, but we need firm action by the rugby league, just as it took firm action to save the Bradford Bulls a year ago.

I will move on to the second item I want to bring to the House’s attention: Oldfield Primary School, which is a small village primary school that had a bad Ofsted report in the spring. It was two days away from going into a federation of local community schools called the Footprints Federation. It did badly in the Ofsted report, but over the last few months it has shown remarkable improvement. My office has been inundated with letters from parents. I will read one, which commends the new headteacher, Angela Vinnicombe, who is the head of the Footprints Federation, and her staff. My constituent says:

“The difference they have made to the teaching, the learning, the building itself and more importantly the morale and enthusiasm of the staff and children is absolutely second to none. Quite frankly I am gobsmacked as to how this has not been recognised by the relevant bodies and I’m hoping you could have a voice in this matter”.

What has happened, David Hanson—sorry, Mr Hanson. I got slightly carried away. One of the advantages of meeting in this Chamber is your chairmanship. If we were in the main Chamber, that would not be possible. If we revert to the main Chamber next year, I hope you might be elevated because there may be some changes afoot, I hear.

Anyway, the “relevant body” that the parent was worried about is, in fact, the regional schools commissioner, Vicky Beer. It is hard to get hold of Vicky Beer; I think it would have been similarly difficult a century or so ago to get hold of the Viceroy of India. I have managed to get through to some of her officers. The regional schools commissioner has decided that the school should be academised. I do not like to take an over-ideological approach to education—there are good academies in Keighley and there are good community schools. But if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it. I have asked for a meeting with the Minister for School Standards and I hope he will grant that, so I can bring down one parent, one governor and one teacher to plead the case.

Children are having their Christmas lunches and festivities, unsure of the future. The preferred academy is Bronte Academy Trust, which runs three schools in new constituencies. It has good teachers and staff. It has had one or two teething problems and has only been going since 2016. Some parents and teachers from Bronte Academy Trust have approached me and said that they do not really support what is, in effect, a hostile takeover. Bronte Academy Trust will be better sticking to improving the three schools it already has. I hope that we can take a non-ideological approach and think principally about the education of the children at Oldfield. I will visit the school as soon as it comes back on 3 January.

I promised I would refer to a couple of early-day motions that Members may have missed. One has a Christmas theme and the other looks ahead to the new year. The first, with the Christmas theme, is early-day motion 1931 in my name on Boxing day trains. I will not labour the point because I have mentioned it before in debates, but it is a disgrace that there are no Boxing day trains except for on four lines in the south-east of England. I have constituents who cannot get to Yorkshire for Christmas from London because they have to be at work on 27 December or they lose their jobs.

There are many bank holiday sporting fixtures—I will come back to two or three of those. There are retail sales—our high streets need that boost. The good news is that, in a debate on transport in Yorkshire yesterday, the Rail Minister offered to meet me in January to look at Christmas and Boxing day trains. I will not labour the point because I have mentioned it before in debates, but it is a disgrace that there are no Boxing day trains except for on four lines in the south-east of England. I have constituents who cannot get to Yorkshire for Christmas from London because they have to be at work on 27 December or they lose their jobs.

Let me turn to the second early-day motion. One of the great things of this year was England’s sporting success in the World Cup. In Keighley, at the said Keighley Cougars, we had a cross-community showing of that semi-final match. I speak as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Portugal—that may have escaped your attention, Mr Hanson. I was elected this week and it was a close-run race. Next summer in Portugal, England will play football in the UEFA nations
league finals. My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) has drawn attention to the fact that it will be hidden away on subscription TV. It will not be available to the nation—we will not be able to have community showings of it. I hope the Government will take some action on listed events. I call upon Comcast, which has taken over Sky, as a gesture to the English nation, to make the game available free to either the BBC or ITV, so the nation can enjoy it as a whole.

Finally, we are looking forward to Christmas and I am particularly looking forward to attending midnight mass at Leeds Roman Catholic Cathedral. For the second year in a row it will be live on the BBC, such is the quality of the choir—last year on BBC 1 and this year on Radio 4. After my Christmas lunch, my attention will turn to Boxing day; as a sporting enthusiast, you know there are plenty of sporting fixtures to look forward to—even if you cannot get to them by train.

Last year, I managed to place some charity Christmas bets; as someone observed, only one of the four actually came home. I must put on record that this year’s bet is with Betfred in Ilkley, which has put up the majority of the bet—it put up £80 and I put up £20. If we win, all the money goes to the homelessness project Bradford Nightstop. I am backing Leeds and Burnley to win, Bradford to eke out a draw at Sunderland and, for racing fans, I am backing Waiting Patiently, the Yorkshire-trained horse, in the King George at Kempton. Happy Christmas to one and all.

David Hanson (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, but I am slightly disappointed that he has not put money on Liverpool versus Newcastle on Boxing day.

2.29 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan). His remarks about his connection with rugby league remind me that my late father set up all the BBC camera cables at rugby league grounds and became a commentator only in an emergency, when the commentator failed to turn up.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I want to report on a few things—some on which progress is being made, which is good news, and some on which work still needs to be done. Of course, some of us are still celebrating last night, when Tottenham overcame Arsenal 2-0 at the Emirates. More importantly, though, disgracefully, a bottle was thrown by a thug in the crowd at the man of the match and goal scorer, Dele Alli. That raises serious problems for all football grounds. If people get into the habit of doing that, players and linesmen might be seriously injured. We need to reflect that people can be competitive at football and support their team, but they do not need to behave in a thuggish manner.

Let me refer to the Select Committees on which I have the honour of serving, which do excellent work. I do not expect Members’ sympathy, but those of us who suffer on the Procedure Committee wrestled for some weeks with the question, “What does ‘meaningful’ actually mean?” I am not sure we came up with the answer, and I look forward to the Government’s finally coming up with one in the new year.

I press my hon. Friend the Minister to encourage the Leader of the House to provide the Backbench Business Committee with more time in the main Chamber. We did not have business in the main Chamber for nine weeks, which, in my view, made us almost redundant as a Committee. That is extremely regrettable, because the debates we put on are well subscribed and very positive.

Bob Stewart: I have never been on the Backbench Business Committee to make a selection, but what my hon. Friend says is a shock to me. I thought the Committee’s business was built into the timetable; I did not realise it could be shifted. I thought it was part of the set programme. As a normal Member, I am really quite surprised that it is not. Others are nodding in agreement. I think that is wrong—we should have that time, because it gives us power.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that intervention. The reality is that a certain number of days are given over to the Backbench Business Committee in a year. However, this is a two-year Session, and the Government have refused to increase pro rata the number of days in the main Chamber provided to the Backbench Business Committee.

I am also a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. We have inquiries ongoing into the future of the high street, which is very topical, and leasehold reform. What house builders are doing to sell out freeholds to finance companies from under the feet of people who bought leases on properties is a scandal. We also have ongoing inquiries into fracking: the tragedy of Grenfell, which continues; building regulations and fire safety in general, on which there is much to do to ensure that people’s homes and business are safe; and social housing law across the country. Our Committee’s work is very topical and relevant.

During the year, I have been engaged in setting up three new all-party parliamentary groups. The first is the APPG for Council of Sri Lankan Muslim Organisations UK—COSMOS—which seeks to combat the prejudice and quite disgraceful antics of the Sri Lankan Government against Muslims in Sri Lanka.

The second concerns the holocaust memorial, which will go alongside Parliament. It will be a long-standing memorial to the horrors of the holocaust, and the education centre will educate people of all ages about what happened during the holocaust and why we must never allow it to happen again. The former Chief Rabbi said that Jewish people in this country fear that what is going on now is similar to what happened in Germany in the 1930s. For Jewish people in this country to feel that way is a tragedy—a tragedy for them and for all of us. In 2019, we must redouble our efforts to combat all forms of antisemitism and send a signal to all people that, whatever their religion, they have the right to celebrate that religion in this country. We must do that on a long-standing basis.

The final all-party group I set up was the APPG on building communities, which aims to encourage the building not just of new housing but of communities. That is something that has to be developed.
As many colleagues know, we had London elections during the year. I pay tribute to my colleague Manji Kara, a long-standing councillor in Harrow East. He chose to leave his safe ward and fight a much more difficult one, and as a result stepped down from the council after 14 years’ exemplary service. Even more importantly, I pay tribute to Christine Bednell, who stepped down as a councillor after 47 years, only because of her ill health.

I will spare Members my prepared notes about all the contributions I have made to debates since September. Apparently there have been 32 of them, so I am sure everyone is grateful that I will not refer to them. However, I will mention some important faith-based activities. First, we have a long-running campaign for Jains to be able to record their religion in the 2021 census. I support other groups, such as the Sikhs, who want to ensure that they have the right to record their religion, but Jains at the moment have to tick, “Other”—there is no measure in the census of whether they celebrate their religion. That needs to be changed.

We had the good news this morning that legislation will be brought forward next year to remove caste as a protected characteristic from the Equality Act 2010. We expect that long-standing provision to be repealed by the summer. That is positive news, which will be warmly welcomed by the Hindu community across the country. The Government’s proposals in that respect are very positive.

My constituency is the most multi-religious and multicultural in the country, bar none, so I have enjoyed the opportunity to participate in many activities with faith groups in the past year. I visited 10 temples on Hindu new year’s day, and over the Christmas period I shall celebrate with the Jewish community at one of our local synagogues. I will be visiting the Muslim community shortly after the new year and celebrating with the Hindu community on new year’s day itself, as well as visiting churches. It does not end at Christmas—the Greek Orthodox Church in my constituency starts the new year two weeks later, with its Christmas celebrations, so I shall join in with those, too.

The casework I am dealing with at the moment stems predominantly from Harrow Council’s failure to provide the service it should. I criticise it perennially for a number of things, but one of the key problems is its failure to communicate with local residents when they have complaints. According to our statistics, we are dealing with more than 30 cases a week where the council has simply failed to respond to reasonable requests from the local authority about the service that it should be providing.

In the new year we have some good news coming up, which I have raised on many occasions. The new building at the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore, in my constituency, opened a couple of weeks ago and the patients and staff—medical and non-medical—moved in, which is positive. I have been pushing for this for 12 years and I am delighted that it has come to fruition. I congratulate the board and everyone who has made it possible. There will be a royal opening in March, which the local community will celebrate.

In my constituency, we recently opened the first state-sponsored Hindu secondary school. The Secretary of State came to open it, which was positive, and it demonstrates what can happen when local people come together and demand the right for a faith-based school, if that is what they choose.

There are two new developments coming on stream: the Elysian retirement community is being built alongside Stanmore station and Jewish Care is setting up a care facility for newly retired people, which will lead on to live-in care in Stanmore. These are two positive measures that are going to be warmly welcomed in the local community.

This year homelessness and the problems of people sleeping rough have been particularly important. My Homelessness Reduction Act became law on 1 April and the duty of public authorities to refer became law on 1 October. Those things are already having a dramatic effect on combatting homelessness. Some 58,660 households were assisted in the first three months that the Act was operational. I take the view that just one person sleeping rough is an absolute national disgrace, but without this change in the law it would have been much worse. We must prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place; under the legislation that has been extremely successful. I am glad that we have the Housing First pilot initiatives. They will enable rough sleepers to be housed and to be given the level of support they need to put them back on the straight and narrow.

I urge my hon. Friends in Government to make sure that we are building the homes that people need, at prices they can afford, both around cities and beyond. It is no good building homes that people cannot afford and for them to feel envious of the people that have them. At this time of year, when many people are generous towards the homeless, we must remember that homelessness happens not just at Christmas, but every single day. There are 320,000 people across the country who are homeless, sleeping on sofas or rough sleeping. It is our duty as politicians to make sure that those people have a home of their own that they can rely on.

Mr Hanson, I wish you, all the staff, all colleagues and especially the staff in my office a very merry Christmas and a happy, peaceful, prosperous and, above all, healthy new year.

2.44 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson, in these unusual surroundings. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for ensuring that the debate took place today. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I would like to associate myself with his comments regarding our Jewish colleagues, friends, family and communities across the United Kingdom, both for the remaining part of this year and in the future.

I hope to talk about a number of matters, including one which was brought to my attention this morning and which raises great concern. I heard today that the RZSS WildGenes laboratory at Edinburgh Zoo has said that in all probability the Scottish wildcat is now extinct as a gene pool. The gene pool of one of the most endangered wild mammals in the world, which resides in Scotland in very small numbers, is now so affected by the domestic cat that it cannot be identified separately. The only gene pool we have is in approximately 100 Scottish wildcats that are in captivity. With the enormous challenges
that face this country and the world, it is interesting to look at one small aspect, in this case an animal that lives in the United Kingdom, was far more widespread in past decades and is now literally extinct in the wild. If the follow-up tests that are currently being done confirm this, it would be truly tragic news.

As we approach Christmas, it is a salutary lesson to think that in the United Kingdom we were asked to take care of a mammalian group and we have managed to do that so badly that it has fallen into extinction. We look at the giant panda, the tiger and the elephant—all of which rightly require care—and yet we may have let one of the most important and unique groups of animals slip into extinction on our doorstep. I find that very saddening, but I compliment Edinburgh Zoo on the work that it does.

Bob Stewart: One of the great things about these debates is that we always learn something—I had no idea about the information that the hon. Gentleman has given us about the iconic Scottish bobcat. I am still a bit unclear; is he saying that the Scottish bobcat is still has given us about the iconic Scottish bobcat. I am still an idea about the information that the hon. Gentleman
debates is that we always learn something—I had no

Martin Whitfield: A more succinct description I could not give. The gene pool is now so diluted that individual Scottish wildcats that have been caught and tested in the wild are almost impossible to distinguish from domestic cats. That is the nature of cats generally, but it is disappointing that we have reached that stage. The only gene pool with a guarantee of wildcat status exists in the 100 or so that are kept in zoos and wildlife parks around the world.

I thank the teachers and teaching staff of East Lothian and those who work for East Lothian Council, as well as the pupils who have done so much this year, such as those at North Berwick High School who held a UN model assembly at which schools from around Scotland gathered to debate important matters. It was a great privilege to go into what were effectively committee settings and listen to highly intelligent and articulate young people discussing such important matters—indeed, some of their ideas and proposals merit consideration in this House. I feel very hopeful for the future and for politicians to come. At primary schools I have visited, children have asked questions that I just could not answer; I had to do the honest thing and tell them that I did not know, but would go and find out.

I want to mention people who have invisible disabilities, and the work of Grace, a campaigner from Prestonpans in East Lothian who created Grace’s Sign. I also want to mention Judith Dunn, whom I invited to Parliament on #AskHerToStand day. It was such a wonderful day: so many women came from all around the country, and it speaks so positively of what we can achieve.

The Civil Nuclear Constabulary is a strange and almost unknown group of police officers who protect our nuclear establishments, but who are separate from the police force and are a civilian group. They are the armed backup to our police forces. They have been in a pension dispute for a long while now; I was able to ask a question about it this morning in business questions. This Government have kicked down the road the question of their pension settlement and when they can retire. I had hoped that for this Christmas they would have had a present of knowing what was going to happen to them; I sincerely hope that by next Christmas they have an understanding.

I wanted to talk about universal credit, which has been in my constituency since 2016. We are not a constituency where it is being rolled out; we were one of the test beds. East Lothian reflects the statistical make-up of the United Kingdom and particularly Scotland very accurately, so it was a test bed for universal credit, and it has not gone well. We have problems with universal credit that go beyond that roll-out. It was a great pleasure to hear hon. Members making points earlier about the significant difficulties where there are two payments in one month and then nothing follows in the next month, and the pressure that that brings to bear on families and individuals. Other people are persuaded—I use that word carefully—by advice from the Department for Work and Pensions to set up their own business and then, 11 or 12 months down the line, are let down by the very system that persuaded them to set up their own business because their earnings are such that they suddenly lose their benefits.

I want to talk about the WASPI women—the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign. Many women in my constituency, who are well through their administrative complaints procedure, have received a letter that their case is now being stopped because of the High Court case to allow the judicial review. My understanding is that that letter is incorrect and actually all that has happened is that their case has been postponed until the outcome of the hearing. However, again, it is an indication of how communication from the Government to our constituents is so far from being clear and understandable that it brings more challenges.

With only 99 days to go, however, I want to spend two minutes mentioning the real threat of a no deal. It has come up before and I fear it will come up again, but it needs to come up for a reason. I asked the Prime Minister who she would blame if there was no deal, and she indicated that it would be Parliament’s responsibility. It may well, in one view of it, be Parliament’s responsibility, but the Government are the Executive, with the power to ensure that that does not happen.

I can talk about the announcement today that the word “unlikely” has been dropped from the preparation notes that have been issued. I can talk about the 3,500 troops who have been placed on standby, the cut to any holiday requests from 1 April, the reversion to World Trade Organisation rules, the fact that we do not have an immigration policy that can come in in just over six weeks’ time, the fact that the problem at the Irish border will not be resolved by then and the bottom-line forecast that no deal will be an economic disaster into the future.

Some people have suggested that it is a ruse—that it will never happen. Some people have said, “It could well happen. We don’t know.” Some people have said, “Oh, don’t worry about it,” and some people have said, “Everything will be fine.” People see many versions of the future, but I know it rests with the Prime Minister and within the power of the Government to say, “No deal won’t happen.” I disagree vehemently with leaving the European Union, as do my constituents, but putting
that political decision to one side, I find the executive decision about whether to put the country in a position where it will leave with no deal saddening, upsetting, annoying and frustrating. I also find it—I choose this word carefully—irresponsible, and I would expect far, far more of any Government of the United Kingdom.

At Christmas, I urge that the risk of no deal be removed so that we can move on in whatever way suits the United Kingdom. That will remove the fear. As the children said to me at a high school when I asked them about Europe, “But it’s our future.” It is their future. I am not asking to stay in Europe or for a people’s vote, both of which would be brilliant; I am saying, “Please remove this option, which has no agreement across the House.” For whatever reason it is still on the table, but it is the one thing that should be removed.

I wish everyone a very happy Christmas and a very peaceful and prosperous new year.

2.54 pm

Mr Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield). The comments he has just made about Brexit, which is of course the most contentious issue we face, highlight the fact that these end-of-term debates, even when discussing such serious issues, are always conducted in a good-natured way. It is always a pleasure to take part in them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) raised a particular issue that I suspect none of us were aware of; and highlighted something that could affect any of our constituents. Others, such as the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan), have focused on various aspects of their constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), who is not in his place, had the temerity to suggest that Southend should have city status, when he knows full well that Cleethorpes is the premier resort of the east coast. He suggested that the Taiwanese representative to the UK would have said that Southend beats Cleethorpes, but I know the Taiwanese representative could not possibly have said that. He is too much of a diplomat, and he will also know that his opposite number in Taipei spent part of her childhood in Cleethorpes, so he would be on dangerous ground if he were to make such an outrageous comment.

Sporting themes have been touched on, so it would be remiss of me not to mention Grimsby Town Football Club. Many perhaps do not know that they play in Cleethorpes; Blundell Park, their home ground where they have played since 1898, is indeed in Cleethorpes. Another anomaly is that Cleethorpes Town Football Club, who play in the northern premier league, actually play in Grimsby. Such are the oddities that surround Grimsby and Cleethorpes, where the only recognition that there is a border is when you come to passport control.

More seriously, there are a number of issues I particularly wanted to raise that affect the local area. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) mentioned the role of local authorities, and of course he is a long-serving local authority leader. I have two local authorities serving my area, both unitary councils—North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire. As an aside, I hope some future Government will consider imposing unitary authorities across the country, because I think they are far more efficient and would lead to more resources being made available to provide frontline services.

I recognise the continuing constraints on Government budgets, but I will repeat what I have said on a number of occasions: local authorities need additional resources, and the cuts that have been made to them, although necessary, have probably gone as far as most authorities can manage. It is not just the essential services that those authorities provide, such as adult care, dealing with looked-after children, waste collection and so on, but those things that, while perhaps not essential, improve our quality of life—libraries, parks, open spaces and the like. The feel-good factor plays a part; if we have a nice environment to live in, the reality is that antisocial behaviour is reduced and we all enjoy the facilities provided.

North Lincolnshire Council has the advantage of the business rate pilot, which was introduced last year with the 75% deal. Unfortunately, North East Lincolnshire Council, which applied for it this year, was not given the go-ahead. I have not yet had any feedback on the reasoning for that, but I will put on the record my hope that that will be rectified in future.

I am pleased that both the Business Secretary and the Local Government Secretary have given me and council leaders the opportunity of putting our case personally to them, but I hope they will take note of what was said, and, where there is a successful operation of local enterprise partnerships, support it and allow it to continue. I am sure the administrative ease of being a member of only one can be overcome.

I also draw attention to another aspect of the local economy: our successful designation earlier this year as a part of the Greater Grimsby town deal, which was the first town deal that the Government agreed to. Previously we were familiar with city deals. Under both Labour and Conservative Governments, the focus on cities has been quite successful with city regions and the like. The feel-good factor plays a part; if we have a nice environment to live in, the reality is that antisocial behaviour is reduced and we all enjoy the facilities provided.

Local enterprise partnerships also affect local economic policy. Both my local authorities are members of the Humber LEP and also the Greater Lincolnshire LEP. As a result of the review currently taking place, there is a possibility that local councils will be able to have membership of only one LEP. I can understand the logic of that. It tidies things up from a purely administrative point of view, but I hope the Government will focus their attention on the LEPs that are less successful. In our area, the Humber LEP focuses on the offshore renewables sector and skills that are vital to our local area, and the Greater Lincolnshire LEP focuses on food and seafood processing in the Grimsby/Cleethorpes area. The industry employs more than 5,000 people and works very closely with the Greater Lincolnshire LEP on several projects.

I am pleased that both the Business Secretary and the Local Government Secretary have given me and council leaders the opportunity of putting our case personally to them, but I hope they will take note of what was said, and, where there is a successful operation of local enterprise partnerships, support it and allow it to continue. I am sure the administrative ease of being a member of only one can be overcome.

I also draw attention to another aspect of the local economy: our successful designation earlier this year as a part of the Greater Grimsby town deal, which was the first town deal that the Government agreed to. Previously we were familiar with city deals. Under both Labour and Conservative Governments, the focus on cities has been quite successful with city regions and the like, and there has been a boost to many of our cities as a result.

However, in recent years many of our provincial towns have fallen behind and they need additional support if they are to revive their local economies. The town deal for Greater Grimsby—this is crucial—is private sector led and involves the whole community. We have representatives from the LEPs, the universities and English Heritage, or whatever it calls itself now, as well as from
the local authorities, both Members of Parliament and so on. It is wide-ranging and there are large employers in the area. I thank the Government for the designation and for the support that they have given subsequently. The local authorities are extremely pleased and they will of course be a key part of the town deal.

The Humber ports are another important part of our local economy, particularly Immingham in my constituency and neighbouring Grimsby. The Grimsby and Immingham port complex, measured by tonnage, is the largest port in the country. It is absolutely crucial, as Members will appreciate, to the local economy. I hope that in the post-Brexit world, we will seriously consider free port status, which I have raised with various Ministers. Indeed, I am fortunate enough to have been elected chairman of the all-party group on free ports. It is a concept that needs serious consideration and could give a real boost to northern coastal economies.

A recent report published by the Mace consultancy talks about superports in the north of England that could increase employment opportunities considerably. I hope that that is given serious consideration. We had a debate in this Chamber about two months ago when the Exchequer Secretary was reasonably supportive of the project, given the constraints of Government policy at the moment. He said it is technically possible to create free ports and free zones while we are members of the EU, but port operators and businesses have pointed out to me that there are far too many hoops to get through and hurdles to get over to make it a sensible project.

I will conclude by mentioning direct rail services. The Minister who will respond to this debate is a former Rail Minister who took a great interest in this project and a similar service to his own constituency. He also represents a coastal community and will be aware of the great opportunities that open up if we can get direct services, particularly to London. On the “Today” programme yesterday, John Larkinson, the interim chief executive of the Office of Rail and Road, hinted that he was rather enthusiastic about increasing open-access operators on the network. That might be possible. As the Minister knows, there were previous applications from an open-access operator to operate services up the mainline and then from Doncaster through Scunthorpe to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. The operator withdrew an application that was going to be submitted earlier this year because of the review that is taking place.

I now hope that the Government will enthusiastically support open-access operations, including on Boxing day, which the hon. Member for Keighley mentioned in his early-day motion and which he will be pleased to know I have already supported. I hope the Minister and shadow Minister will take on board the need to get to Cleethorpes more easily from London, York and Blackpool, and from all parts of the nation because, as I said in my opening remarks, it is the premier resort of the east coast.

Finally, Mr Robertson, I wish you, everyone in this Chamber and the House, and all our constituents a happy Christmas. I should acknowledge, as other Members have, the important part local communities, running charities, voluntary groups and so on. Without them, our communities would be much the poorer. Happy Christmas to one and all.

3.7 pm

Rachel Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to have you join us and chair this section of the debate, Mr Robertson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) on the tour—indeed, it was a tour de force of his local economy and on talking about the railway system. I want to give him assurances and even more hope by saying that a Labour Government will bring the railways back into public ownership so that they belong to the people of our country, and we will ensure that there is good connectivity to Cleethorpes.

Martin Vickers: We had direct services to Grimsby and Cleethorpes, but the nationalised British Rail withdrew them in 1992.

Rachel Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the issue. We are not going back to British Rail. We are moving forward to a new model of public ownership that has been tried and tested across the industry, and we are ready to put it in place as soon as we get the first Queen’s Speech, which I am sure will not be too long now.

I want to talk about the disposal of public assets and the associated issues that are prevalent in my constituency. I will talk about the Post Office, the consultation and what is currently happening. I will talk about Bootham Park Hospital and a decision that is currently on the Minister’s desk. Also, time permitting, I will touch on Bootham Crescent, the football ground that I am sure many are familiar with. I will start with the Post Office.

As we speak, a consultation is going on about the future of the Crown post office, which has been at 22 Lendal since 1884. We have lost many post offices from the city, but that one is in a prime location because of the flows of tourists and residents into the city from the rail station and by bus, and because of its accessibility for vehicles, particularly for disabled people, who can be dropped there. People are attracted to that part of the city, which is thriving—good news in this day and age—not least because it is opposite Appleton’s pie shop, which is Britain’s greatest pie shop. That is a good place from which people can orient themselves around York, and it is a successful part of the city.

It has been decided that the Crown post office will close its doors. It will be moved into WH Smith, not far from Lendal—but far enough, in Coney Street. That will be seriously detrimental to the people of the city. We have learned that the consultation will not be on whether the move should happen, because we are told that that has already been determined, so I have questioned what it is about. York post office is one of the few profitable post offices, and I think it is fair to say that those concerned are almost going through the motions of a consultation on the move. I find it deeply distressing that now is the time chosen for a consultation, because we all know that staff throughout the country work incredibly hard at this season of the year, to ensure that parcels and cards are delivered on time. At the same time, the future of their jobs, and where they will be located, is in question. The consultation on 28 December is at the busiest time of the year.

I find it disturbing that the Post Office has not done its homework. I have had several meetings now and glaring gaps have appeared, particularly with respect to
access issues. I mentioned how accessible the Lendal post office is. WH Smith, into which it might move, is a struggling business in York. I have been in there and seen how empty it is. My grandfather spent his working life there, and it is an important business to my family, so I am sorry to see it in that state. In that area there are many boarded up shops and the economy is struggling, for a number of reasons, one of which is business rates.

Business rates are incredibly high in York, because of the valuations on businesses, not least because of offshore landlords trying to keep their investment levels up. That is why we need a transition away from a business rate system. Surely, it is a perverse economic choice to move the post office from a thriving area of the city to an area that is, frankly, dying. Not only that, but the new area will be less accessible. It is accessible to pedestrians walking along Coney Street, but not to cars. However, the city is putting in counter-terrorism measures that will restrict access completely. The Post Office was completely unaware of that when I raised it, but it means that disabled people will not be able to get to the post office. Bicycles can be parked outside the Lendal post office, but that will not be possible in Coney Street. The move is detrimental.

The post office is, of course, moving to a back corner of WH Smith, out of sight and out of the way. It is a cramped space, and that is a poor model, particularly given the traffic that comes through at this time of year.

Bob Stewart: Welcome to the Chair, Mr Robertson. All the post offices in my constituency have been moved into WH Smith. That is something that I fought hard, as I am sure other hon. Members have done. One reason, which the Post Office explained to me and which is quite battle-winning, in a way, is that in my constituency—although obviously not in York, which has a profitable post office—£1.30 was being paid out for every pound taken. It was not economically viable. People do not use the post office any more, and the services of the old post office, such as vehicle taxation, are now done online. I do not know how we will solve that problem.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. We have learned that people have been moving on to WH Smith terms and conditions as new employees. Of course, we are talking about minimum wage jobs, and highly skilled people are currently working across the postal service, so it is detrimental right across the board.

I would like the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), to become more active in the process. We are told as we go through the consultation that many things are commercially confidential, and I respect that; but she must scrutinise the figures, looking particularly at the predicted footfall, and ensure that the evidence is robust. If public services such as the post office are downgraded, clearly my community will miss out on that vital service, but so will the wider economy, which benefits from people coming into the city and using the post office at Lendal. I trust that even at this hour the Post Office will take note of those serious concerns about the withdrawal of business and the inaccessibility of the building, and reconsider the decision for the sake of residents.

Bootham Park Hospital is a lovely, iconic building that was built in 1777 as a mental health hospital, which has served our city. Its doors closed in 2015, three working days after a decision by the Care Quality Commission. I have debated that issue, and the failures that took place, in this House, but my concern is how the site is being disposed of by NHS Property Services and the Health Minister.

Services closed last year and the site became available and was put on the market. The clinical commissioning group was asked whether it had any requirement for the site. It said, “No, because we’re building a new mental health hospital that is due for completion in 2020.” The site was therefore to be disposed of but, as the “for sale” sign went up, the acute trust based next to Bootham Park Hospital said, “Hang on a minute—we have urgent clinical needs that cannot be addressed because our campus is too small. We therefore need to ensure that transitional care is built on the site.”

The trust wants to put physiotherapy services on to that site. As a former physiotherapist, I understand how important it is to ensure that we have proper transitional care and address the serious delayed discharges that happen at the hospital. Key worker accommodation could also be put on the site. We are planning a One Public Estate bid to put 190 housing units on the site, which is supported across all political parties, health providers, the York Civic Trust, Historic England and the local authority. We will also put dementia care and extra care facilities on the site. There is an incredible opportunity to address some of the real challenges to our health service by releasing that space to health services.

At the same, the “for sale” notice has been put up to earn a capital receipt by turning the site into more luxury homes and a luxury hotel. We seriously do not need either in our city. We urgently need health facilities. I raise this today following a distressing meeting with the Minister for Health earlier this week, who told me that he was considering not pausing the process and proceeding with the sale of the site. The people of my community will face real health challenges in the future if the sale continues, so the sale is therefore clinically detrimental.
The reality is that if people are held back in hospital because there is no transitional care for them, other people will not be able to access healthcare. We saw a real crisis in York last year—the trust itself described how bad things got when it called the situation a war zone—when the hospital was just not big enough to deal with the local population, which is seriously growing; there will be another 10,000 people by 2030. It is therefore absolutely crucial that the Health Minister pauses this process and looks at the health needs of my community, to ensure that we have the right facilities in the right place for the future.

I will close by talking about Bootham Crescent. Many will know that it has been there since 1932 and is a site of real historic interest to the footballing world. I have learned so much in the last few weeks about, for instance, the tunnels that run under the pitch. Fans used to travel down them at half time to get to the other end. I understand that all sorts happened in those tunnels; I will leave that to the imagination of hon. Members. The site will be disposed of as York City move into their new ground next season, which we hope will bring success; they definitely need it. We want to ensure that the site is utilised for the benefit of our city.

We also want recognition of the site’s social history over nearly a century—when listing sites of interest we should not only look at physical structures but think about that social history—including the team, which originally came out of Rowntree’s, and all the social history of York that surrounds it. We should ensure that we have a real memory of all that has taken place there. These spaces in our city have such significance to York. It is really important that they are dealt with delicately as we move forward.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak, Mr Robertson. I wish everyone a very peaceful Christmas. It is a time of delicately as we move forward.

I will turn to several issues that I have dealt with over a long time. Are there a series of these damn things going up?

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and also to follow the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I will come on later to the issue of NHS land, but I will first concentrate on a serious situation that is still ongoing—the closure of Gatwick airport due to drones.

I led a debate in this Chamber on 18 July 2017 on drones and their conflict with aircraft. I mentioned that, on 2 July 2017, the runway at Gatwick was closed twice—one for nine minutes and once for five minutes—due to drone activity. Five flights were diverted and nine were held in a holding pattern. The runway has now been closed for more than 18 hours and will not reopen until 7 pm at the earliest. This is an incredibly serious situation involving the criminal activity of someone flying industrial-type drones in and over the airspace of an airfield.

When this situation is over, the Government and the aviation industry must look at this incredibly seriously. This kind of disruption to hundreds of thousands of people going about their ordinary business—seeing their loved ones at Christmas, going on honeymoons, going on holidays—is completely unacceptable. Technical measures, whether geofencing or guns that can fire nets to ensnare drones, must be put in place. If not, we will see this happen again. We warned about it when it happened on a small scale a year and a half ago. It has now happened on a large and costly scale.

Bob Stewart: I do not understand why the runway has been closed for so long. Surely, if a drone is flying, people identify it, find out where it has come from and bring it down. The runway has been closed for a heck of a long time. Are there a series of these damn things going up?

Jeremy Lefroy: As I understand it, the drones had gone but came back again, and the police are trying to find out who is controlling them. They have no means of stopping them flying other than by shooting them down, which they are loth to do because of stray bullets. We have to look immediately at serious measures to deal with this threat. If this happens again at Heathrow or other major airports, we will see considerable disruption to people’s lives and losses to the economy.

Nearly six years ago, the Francis report came out as a result of the terrible things that happened in Stafford Hospital over several years. Since then, a huge amount has been done to put that right and to make the County Hospital, as it is now called, one of the best-performing hospitals in the country for A&E services. For many weeks now, the A&E there has either admitted or discharged more than 95% of patients, and sometimes as much as 98%, within four hours. I pay tribute to the staff who have been through that difficult time since the 2000s and stuck at it right through to now, making the hospital a credit to the NHS.

The hospital still faces a lot of challenges. There is not enough activity there; we need to see more day case and elective work. I have been talking with the clinical commissioning groups and the University Hospitals of North Midlands trust to see that that happens, because it is vital that the hospital is maintained and grows. I also pay tribute to Paula Clark, the trust’s retiring chief executive. She took over at a difficult time from Mark Hackett, who himself had steered the hospital and the trust through difficult times. Paula has done a great job in the last three years, and I wish her well in retirement.

On the matter mentioned by the hon. Member for York Central, there is additional NHS land in the hospital’s grounds that is currently not being used. It is my firm belief that that land should be retained for health purposes—NHS purposes or allied health purposes, such as care. This kind of land, in or near to a town centre, is precious. There is other land. We are already building housing at two and a half times the national average. We do not need more housing in that area. We need to preserve that land for other related activities.

I will turn to several issues that I have dealt with over recent years and will, I hope, continue to deal with next year. The first is the work of unpaid carers, which goes unsung. They work year in, year out to look after their loved ones, without reward; they sometimes receive a
carer’s allowance, but that has not gone up in recent years. They do it for love, because they are devoted to the people whom they care for. In Staffordshire we have had certain funds available for short breaks for carers, but those funds have been reduced and may eventually not be there at all. It is vital that carers, particularly unpaid carers, and other support services have the opportunity to take those short breaks, which they would not otherwise be able to do.

I intend in the coming year to concentrate on this area and to try to encourage both local government and national Government to look at it. Of course, it is not just down to local and national Government. Local charities and other organisations are vital in the support for unpaid carers, and at Christmas, I want particularly to pay tribute to them.

The businesses in the Stafford constituency are an outstanding bunch. There are all types, from the smallest to the largest. A couple of weeks ago, I had the honour of taking the ambassador of China to businesses in my constituency—both to General Electric, where he saw the plans for a bid for a major offshore wind farm, off the east coast of Scotland, which is potentially coming to fruition, and to Perkins, a subsidiary of Caterpillar, that makes wonderful large diesel engines; they are getting more efficient all the time. It also manufactures: it has a manufacturing plant in China.

I took the ambassador to Shugborough Hall. Shugborough is the former home of Admiral Anson and of Patrick Lichfield. Shugborough has been retaken by the National Trust in the last couple of years. It was an honour to show the ambassador the dinner service presented to Admiral Anson in, I think, 1744, when his ship, which was on a round-the-world voyage, limped into Canton at the time that it was going up in flames. His men helped to put out the fire of Canton and, as a result, he was given that magnificent dinner service by the grateful inhabitants.

I had the honour, on another occasion, of visiting a local business set up by Barry Baggott and now owned by German investors, who have put a great deal of money into it. That shows how small-scale manufacturing can and does thrive in the United Kingdom. The business makes high-speed washing machines for glasses and cups that are used in Costa Coffee and other such places around the country. It is a local, British business. It gets an order one day; it makes the machine and delivers it the next day. That is the kind of just-in-time manufacturing that can and does take place on a small scale, not just on the large scale of motor plants.

As I mentioned, Stafford is building housing at two and a half times the national average, in accordance with the plan that we have, and that is right, but I want to see the infrastructure. I am not prepared to see, in our next plan, large-scale housing being proposed without the relevant infrastructure being put in at the same time or in advance. I would also like to see more green belt. It is fine that we are allocating greenfield as well as brownfield land for new housing. I have no problem with that: we have to meet housing needs. But I think that if we also brought back or introduced some more green belt—that would protect, for instance, Stafford from merging into Stone, which I see as a risk at the moment—people would be prepared to accept more housing, because they would see that more green belt was being put in place. At the moment, people do not know where the expansion of Stafford northwards and Stone southwards will end, because they just see more and more proposals for housing on greenfield land.

I come now to the issue of Stafford town centre. A major part of it is thriving. We have just seen the newest Odeon cinema in the country open. We have now two cinemas, having a few months ago had none, because the old one was closed: it has now reopened. I am very glad to see that part of the town centre is thriving, but the north part of the town centre and the market square need a great deal of support and help. We need to repurpose some of the buildings. We need more people living in the town centre. However, we also need to see more local independent businesses thriving, and that relates to something else that the hon. Member for York Central mentioned—absentee landlords for properties, who keep rent prices high. Even if the properties come within the rates support, whereby rates do not have to be paid, the rent is too high and the overheads are too high, and local businesses cannot afford to be there. We need to work on that and to encourage the parts of town centres that are currently neglected to come back into use and thrive. That is also right at the top of my agenda.

It was a great honour to welcome a few weeks ago the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), for a visit to Staffordshire Women’s Aid’s new refuge in Stafford. Building it up over the last few years has been a magnificent achievement by that organisation and the local community. We also had the opportunity to take the Minister to Eagle House to see the work of the Housing First project, which Stafford Borough Council has introduced and which has had a great effect. At this point, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for all the work that he has done on homelessness. I am sure that the Housing First project is partly due to his sterling work.

One issue that has come up and which has been raised by colleagues is the new psychoactive substances, which are causing great distress. In Staffordshire and particularly in Stoke and Stafford, we have a terrible thing called monkey dust. I do not know whether others have seen this problem across the country. Monkey dust seems to be in our area particularly and it has a terrible effect on the people who take it. It makes them more aggressive and has led to quite some problems with antisocial behaviour. The police are on to it, but we have to be vigilant all the time to ensure that new psychoactive substances are dealt with and the production, wherever it is, is closed down as soon as possible.

I would like to turn to one or two international matters, Mr Robertson. Given your strong interest in Ethiopia—where I am a trade envoy for my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister—you are well aware of the importance of creating jobs and livelihoods for the hundreds of millions of young people across the developing world and particularly across Africa. The population of Africa is expected to double from 1.2 billion to 2.4 billion and it will have the highest number of young people on the globe, on this planet, by 2060. Therefore it is critical that the United Kingdom supports Governments such as that of Ethiopia, whose population is now more than 100 million, and others as they try to develop opportunities for young people.
The alternative to that is what we have seen over the last few years, which is migration and, often, migration under the compulsion of human traffickers. I saw some Ethiopians in Calais at the beginning of this year. They had reached Calais through that kind of pressure and were seeking to come over to the United Kingdom to work. Unless we provide and see created the kind of opportunities that I have described for young people across Africa and in developing countries elsewhere, the kind of crisis with refugees that we saw in 2015 will be as nothing compared with what we see in the future.

It is critical that we work together. That is why, as chair of the international Parliamentary Network on the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, I have tried to set up a global coalition for youth employment. But the issue is not just Africa. In September, I was in Kosovo, talking with its Government and Parliament, at the invitation of its Parliament, about its problem. It has 60% youth unemployment, and that is a country in the heart of Europe.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases, it has been a great honour to see the work done by so many British institutions around the world to tackle malaria and the 18 or so neglected tropical diseases. Those institutions include the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, the University of York, Keele University and, in Scotland, the University of Stirling. The problem is that progress, which had been superb since 2000 under Labour, coalition and Conservative Governments, has stalled because of the resistance of the malaria parasite to the drugs and the resistance of mosquitoes to the insecticides on bed nets, which had been so successful in helping to reduce deaths and incidences by more than half over that period. Therefore it is vital that we keep going with the work and research that is being done, across our universities, for new insecticides and drugs.

I will close with the issue of human rights and, in particular, religious freedom. I am sad to say that I see the space for human rights closing in many parts of the world, rather than opening up, and the same goes for religious freedom. It is vital that this country remains a beacon for human rights and religious freedom and that we do not succumb to the kinds of pressures that we see in other countries, where people are forced to keep quiet about their sincere beliefs. When we see our international partners going in the wrong direction, and we know which countries those are, it is vital that we encourage them—often this is better done privately—to recognise that allowing people to practise their faith, or lack of faith, is vital to the human soul. With that, I wish everybody here a happy Christmas and new year.

3.39 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): What an appropriate and enjoyable way to round off my first full calendar year as a Member of Parliament. It is great to recap—indeed, I was just looking at my stats. It feels like it has been a whirlwind in some ways and an eternity in others, but it is certainly never boring. In the past year, I have spoken in 167 debates, so clearly I cannot shut up in this place, but it has been good fun and a challenge, too.
on average, two people a week are dying in Scotland as a result of having to sleep rough. The average life expectancy of those living on the streets is just 39. In Glasgow, the picture is that, in the last year, 5,300 people found themselves homeless. That figure covers just homeless applications, and does not include those who do not present themselves to apply as homeless.

The council in Glasgow had a statutory duty to house 4,200 people. There are only 8,000 social rented lettings available per year in Glasgow, so the council was able to secure accommodation for only 2,400 people. The physical capacity of the state to help people is failing. That is not on and we need to address it. That is a shameful figure. It should be a fundamental human right to have shelter. We should restore that to the principles of the governance of this country. That is something I hope we will find a consensus on in the new year.

As a Member of Parliament for the only city in Scotland that is a dispersal area for asylum seekers, another challenge has been immigration and asylum cases, which account for the bulk of my casework. We work very hard and are challenged by the situation that faces a lot of people. People have come to this country in the most appalling circumstances. I could regale members with many tales of incredible human resilience and courage. It is quite moving to understand what the people who have been able to exist in those circumstances have been through. However, to then see the cold bureaucracy of the Home Office stifling what resilience they have left and destroying what hope they have in their future is devastating for me, as I recognise my limitations as an elected Member to help them. Often, we do get good outcomes, which is reassuring, but it feels like a constant war of attrition. It cannot be right.

We have to look at a more compassionate basis for our asylum and immigration system as we move into 2019. I hope we can achieve that together as a House.

We have to recognise the extent of human suffering that exists in our communities, often cheek by jowl with great prosperity. A lot of the people who find themselves in these situations are very dignified and do not want to talk about the extent of the hardship they face, but none the less, it is there. I want to pay tribute in particular to the Rev. Brian Casey and the Rev. Linda Pollock, two Church of Scotland kirk ministers who have risen to the challenge of the hardship faced by a lot of asylum seekers in my community and have mobilised so many in their congregation to work to help many people facing deportation, detention—without limit, in many cases—and the constant fear of being sent back to their torturers and tormentors. At this time, when we think of Jesus being a refugee, it is appropriate to reflect on the way we treat some of the most vulnerable people in the world who are in our midst.

I also pay tribute to the incredible work of the pupils at Springburn Academy, who rallied to the cause of two of their fellow pupils, Pakistani Christian boys who are facing persecution and had family members killed in Pakistan, by arranging a huge petition. That is a really appropriate thing to think about as we move into the new year: people do rise to the challenge, and our communities are resilient and will act in what they see to be the best interests of their fellow human beings. I think that Government should step up and try to follow the example of the compassion shown by our communities.

Another key issue in my constituency is the number of drug-related deaths, which in Glasgow is more than 100% higher than the European average. It is a critical issue. It is a public health emergency in my city. It is urgent that policy is adapted and reflects the urgency of this crisis in Glasgow. In the new year, I am looking forward to the establishment of the first heroin-assisted treatment facility in Glasgow, hopefully by the summer. In due course, we hope to expand its scope into a full safe drug-consumption facility, which will enable people to interact in a clinical environment to consume drugs and minimise the harm that they face as a result of their addiction, and treat addiction as a public health rather than a criminal justice issue. I will persist with that in the new year.

I also want to pay tribute to the amazing community organisations, some of which I have mentioned. The Beatroute art centre helps to engage people who are socially excluded in the wonderful joy of exploring and realising their musical talents. The Barmulloch Community Development Company has just been awarded the Architects' Journal award for the best public building of 2018, for developing a brand new, state-of-the-art community centre in the heart of Barmulloch, which is an amazing facility in the heart of a community that has historically been quite deprived. It shows that even the poorest communities in our country deserve world-class public services and public buildings, and we should develop our communities in that way, with nothing less than the best quality provision for everyone.

I also recognise Possilpoint, which does amazing work to support disabled people in my constituency, as well as Possibilities, which does similar work. Possilpoint also has a charity called Young People’s Futures, which does a great amount of work to divert young people from being snared by the drug barons and organised criminals in my constituency, and show them that there is a better way forward. That is a really worthwhile effort, particularly by Ann Lawrance, who leads that work.

The Mallard charity provides care for adolescents, particularly those suffering from severe disabilities who require respite care away from their families. It does an amazing bit of work to give their families an opportunity for time away from that constant need to care for their family members. Again, however, once that child transitions from adolescence to adulthood, there is a cliff edge and no support. We need to work hard to look at how we can provide care provision for young people through their adult years, and have a national care service, as Labour has proposed, so there is a cradle-to-grave approach to care and it does not simply drop off a cliff when someone reaches the age of 21.

The Carnbyte credit union also does great work, particularly through its food bank, to support people who are suffering at this time of year. The Balornock uniform bank promotes an environmentally sustainable way to save money by changing school uniforms. Kids grow so quickly that people can do that without feeling shame, because it makes perfect environmental sense to have an exchange. It is a worthwhile and wonderful project that was started by a constituent.

The Quarriers and Penumbra also do amazing work. Penumbra deals with people who have faced problems from alcohol-related brain injuries. That is a cross-section of the amazing work that I have encountered when
[Mr Paul Sweeney]

going round my constituency as a Member of Parliament in the last year. They are all wonderful people, who are often hidden in plain sight—someone going about their private life would not know, but they can be there without anyone being aware of it. Discovering those amazing activities and championing them as much as I can is one of the most wonderful aspects of becoming a Member of Parliament. Hopefully, somehow, some of those amazing pockets of excellence will be embodied in national policy one day.

Another major issue that erupted in Glasgow this year was the tragic fire at the Glasgow School of Art, of which I have been trying to champion the restoration. Hopefully we can find a way forward for that wonderful, iconic building—the most important architectural edifice in my city. As someone who has championed the built environment in Glasgow for many years—long before I was a Member of Parliament—it is very close to my heart.

It is also a reflection of how we need to treat the quality of our public realm and our public buildings in cities across the UK, many of which were built at the highest watermark of Britain’s industrial and commercial prosperity between 1870 and 1914. Most of our city centres are Victorian and Edwardian in character, and they are now of a certain vintage, which means that intensive intervention will be needed to maintain the quality of the built environment in our urban areas.

We have to look, as I will in the new year, at how we adapt our public policy to preserve the wonderful built environment of our great cities across the United Kingdom. In particular, I will look at policies such as VAT, which is levied on renovations but not on new builds. Right away, that creates a 20% perverse incentive against renovations vis-à-vis new builds. We have to look at those sorts of perverse incentives as they apply to our urban areas and ensure that we maintain the amenity of our great cities.

The Springburn winter gardens is a major project that I have been championing in my constituency. It is a category A listed building and the biggest glasshouse in Scotland, but sadly it has been derelict since 1983. It is my personal mission to see it restored, and I hope we will make big progress on that front in 2019. We have already seen encouraging movement through various funding applications.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachaell Maskell), who talked about the closure of a local hospital and the disposal of the site, I am concerned by the major issue of Stobhill Hospital in my constituency, where my younger brother and I were born. It closed as the hospital several years ago and it has been left to total rack and ruin by the NHS board in Glasgow. More than £1 million of lead and copper cabling has been stripped away by organised criminals, which is a huge loss to the national health service. It has simply walked away and does not care about the ongoing maintenance of such buildings once they are no longer in use.

The site is also a huge blight on my community. I have engaged with the health board on how we bring forward the community to look at the future of that site and manage it in the future. There are often short-sighted policies about the clinical focus of the NHS, but we should look at the legacy of now redundant buildings and how they can be used for a new public purpose to continue to improve our communities. I will do that in the new year as well.

Coming from a shipbuilding background, I have often contributed to defence-related debates in the House and raised the issue of our shipbuilding and associated industries. I am hopeful that in the new year, we will continue to make the case to the Treasury and the Ministry of Defence about the importance of maximising the power of public procurement in this country to pump-prime and provide a sustainable future for our heavy industries, such as shipbuilding, because a huge skill base is invested in them.

If we were to build every ship required by the Ministry of Defence in this country, we would achieve a saving to the Treasury of 20% through wage and supplier payments, rather than giving that to Fincantieri in Italy or Daewoo in South Korea. They are not bidding so low out of altruism; they want the contract because it makes economic sense for them to build those ships. We should take the hint and build them in the UK. We should have a consistent policy that for every major public sector industrial procurement contract that can be done in the UK through our UK manufacturing base, the first preference should be given to UK-sourced manufacturers to maximise the impact of the public purse and the multiplier effect across the UK economy.

That has never been more important than in the last few days. A major crisis has erupted with the potential closure of the St Rollox railway works in my constituency, which could lead to the loss of 200 jobs. The railway works has been there since 1856—the dawn of the railway age—and it would be an absolute tragedy for a community that once built 60% of the world’s locomotives to lose its last railway works. Of course, I am sat next to my hon. Friend the Member for York Central, whose constituency is another major centre of the railway industry. It is important that those skills are there.

The enterprise is fundamentally viable. I will do everything I can to protect and secure the future of the railway works, even if that requires a workers’ buy-out or some means of the workers taking ownership of the site. One of the big problems that the site has faced is that it became a branch plant of works in Milton Keynes. It then became owned by a German company, which is not out there battting for the works, but treats it as a marginal part of its operation. If that site was the master of its own destiny, the management and entrepreneurial spirit of its team could fight for it, and it would have a better, more prosperous future.

We should reflect on the structure of ownership of major industries in this country. The railway works is one example of how great talent and skill, and a critical mass of wealth creation, can be destroyed through the ignorance and lack of entrepreneurial spirit of faceless multinational corporations that come and strip assets and value out of our communities. We have to fight back against that, and I will work on that.

Another major issue I have raised this year is the plight of veterans, and particularly veterans’ suicides, which is a huge problem, including for a significant number of people in my former regiment, the Royal Regiment of Scotland. We continue to raise the problem...
of the mental health of veterans and those in service in the armed forces. We need to continue to rise to that challenge.

It is the duty of the state to provide a minimum level of support in accordance with the military covenant to ensure that those who have served our country in the most challenging circumstances are not left behind once they leave the service—they must be sustained in their careers afterwards. We must do more to protect them. It is simply tragic that so many of them are not being heard, or when they are being heard, that they are not being properly cared for. Often, people have reached out and tried to get support, but they have been ignored or they have not been properly satisfied. It is a horrible situation and we have to do more to raise awareness.

Finally, MPs’ unsung heroes are their staff—the people who support us and stand behind us. I could not do it without my staff and I want to namecheck them: Tom Dickson, James Burns, Hollie Cameron, Stevie Grant, Angus Bugg-Millar, Pat Rice, Alex Paterson, Sophie Dicker and Jordan Agnew. Every one of them has made me the MP that I can be today. It is a reflection of their efforts that I won The Herald’s Scottish MP of the year award this year. I was quite chuffed with that unexpected accolade, but I could not have done it without them. I am merely the figurehead of the operation, but there is a whole more robust and intelligent cohort behind me that makes it all happen. I am sure I speak for all hon. Members when I pay tribute to our staff and those who support us, and wish them all a great Christmas and a happy new year.

3.58 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. I intend to do a quick run round the room and touch on what other hon. Members have spoken about, but I will make it short.

We owe the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, a debt of gratitude for his work throughout the year. He talked passionately about Gateshead. He even dragged me there—sorry; he arranged a visit to Gateshead for the Education Committee and I had a lovely time. I especially liked the wonderful Gateshead College.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) had a long list of organisations in his constituency, and I will emulate him in a minute. He hopes to still be an MP at 100, by which time Southend may have reached city status.

The hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) talked about issues that affect all hon. Members present, such as housing, the effect of really expensive rents and the effect of universal credit, which has put lots of people in our constituencies into debt.

The hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) spoke about iso—

Bob Stewart: Isotretinoin.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman. He spoke about the dangers that some young people, in particular, are going through as a result of using it. He really wants the drug to be reviewed and perhaps its use halted, to save people from the horrendous symptoms that they can experience.

The hon. Member for Southend East (Bob Blackman) gave us a very sobering reflection on religious freedom and how important it is in this country. He talked about Jainism, about Sikhs and about the problem of getting religious information on censuses.

I was quite horrified to hear about the wildcats on “Good Morning Scotland” this morning. As the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) said, they have been interbreeding with feral cats, which is an animal welfare issue. He also talked about Brexit and universal credit.

The hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) gave a great summary of the previous speakers; he was probably much better at that than I am. I am grateful to him, in that respect, because I have been able to rush through some of the others. He also spoke very knowledgably about the work of his two local authorities, as well as speaking about Humber ports and direct rail connections.

The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke about post offices. As Members will know, I have a personal interest in them, having lost my own post office. The post office in Wishaw was closed for three weeks, because it was not possible to get another person to take over the sub-postmastership, which caused my constituents great suffering. She also spoke about NHS land and what happens to it, which is another real issue, as did the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who also talked about drones. I cannot get an earlier flight from London City airport because what has happened at London Gatwick has had an impact right across the United Kingdom; it is really serious. He also talked about work overseas, especially in Africa, and I am grateful to him for some of the knowledge he gave me that I did not have beforehand.

I seriously hope that I have not missed anyone out. I will move on to the hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney), who has had a very interesting time since he became an MP. He cut right through a number of things. He is an enthusiastic supporter of the Glasgow School of Art, which is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss). His own constituency has the famous St Rollox rail works, which I know. My husband took me to Springburn on our honeymoon, to show me where he had been born and lived. However, when we turned the corner, we found that the building he had been born in had been demolished. I make light of it, but there is Springburn Museum for the hon. Gentleman’s delectation and delight, in which there is a picture of my husband on coronation day in 1953, watching his sisters in a race to celebrate the Queen’s coronation. I will not mention where I was then.

With your indulgence, Mr Robertson, I will mention my own constituency of Motherwell and Wishaw, of which I am extremely proud. It is a haven for refugees and has been since 1919. The first group that I can remember are the Lithuanian refugees who came over after the first world war. There have also been Polish refugees and, more recently, Congolese refugees, who were taken to Motherwell, and the Syrian refugees, who
have also been placed and welcomed in my constituency. Indeed, when there was a move by some right-wing organisations to demonstrate against refugees being settled in Wishaw, I am very proud to say that many citizens of Wishaw stood at the bottom cross in Wishaw and campaigned for the refugees’ successful integration, which I believe is really happening. In Motherwell and Wishaw, when children of refugees go to school and meet local children, it becomes a real exercise in getting along together.

I will also talk a bit about what I did as an MP when I was first elected in 2015. We saw a need and we set up the Poverty Action Network, because we knew there were lots of local organisations fighting poverty and we wanted to bring them together and facilitate the exchange of ideas. We have the Basics food bank; St Vincent de Paul; Lanarkshire Links; Voluntary Action North Lanarkshire; Scottish Action for Mental Health; Neighbourhood Networks; Made4U in ML2; Citizens Advice; Motherwell Baptist Church; Safeguarding Communities—Reducing Offending, or Sacro; Women’s Aid; Routes to Work; Big Lottery Fund; Christians Against Poverty; The Haven; Lanarkshire Community Food and Health Partnership; North Lanarkshire Disability Forum; Alzheimer Scotland; Getting Better Together; NL Leisure; Motherwell Football Club Community Trust, because Motherwell is now a community-owned football club; Families Against Murder and Suicide; Chris’s House, which helps families who have suffered the suicide of a family member; Lanarkshire Cancer Care Trust, to which I am especially grateful as it transported my late husband to a hospice on a weekly basis; Community Care Scotland; North Lanarkshire Carers Together; Wishaw, Mirdoust and Fortissat Community Forum; South Wishaw Parish Church; Miracle Foundation, which provides parties and support for young children who have lost parents or other close relatives; Lanarkshire Baby Bank; One Parent Families Scotland; the Welfare Rights Team in North Lanarkshire Council; North Lanarkshire Partnership; Scottish Welfare Fund; NHS Lanarkshire; and Police Scotland, especially the police based in Motherwell.

Mr Sweeney: I loved hearing about the history of the hon. Lady’s connection with Springburn. Sadly, Springburn Museum has now closed down, but I hope that the wonderful exhibit she referred to can be recovered for the renewed Springburn Museum in the winter gardens, which I mentioned.

I also just wanted to say that I was really impressed by the reference to Motherwell, which I did not realise was a co-operative or a fan-owned club. Perhaps that is a great sign of Scotland’s tradition of the co-operative movement, and perhaps in 2019 we can see a further extension of the wonderful co-operative movement in Scotland and across the UK.

Marion Fellows: I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for his intervention. It gives me a chance to say that Motherwell Football Club Community Trust does very good work because it is able to reach groups that other organisations cannot reach, such as men who have not worked or men with drug problems, by bringing them into the stadium. Generally it is men they bring in, although I hope to buy a half-price season ticket in the new year.

I, too, have been doing a lot of work on universal credit. It has been rolled out in North Lanarkshire for about nine months now, and we had the manager who was responsible for its introduction in Lanarkshire at one of our Poverty Action Network meetings. I have to say that some of what she said did not chime with the reality of what has happened, but I do not blame her personally. Nevertheless, there are still real differences and real challenges to be met, because universal credit is causing great hardship, both for those who receive it and for North Lanarkshire Council, whose rent arrears have risen astronomically.

In fact, one of the things that has most made me proud, and most made me upset, is that in the last two weeks I have been to food bank drives—I ran one myself in Motherwell town centre and the local Tesco ran one, too—and when I spoke to the fundraiser in Tesco, she said, “Marion, we don’t even have to tell them what to do. We don’t need to hand out the leaflets. They know what to buy, and they buy it in bulk. And it’s often those who have the least who help the most.” I pay tribute not only to my own constituents, but to constituents all over the UK who make these donations. And may I just say that in the 21st century, it is shameful indeed that we need to do this?

Mr Robertson, I have tested your indulgence, and I want to make sure that both the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth)—the Opposition spokesperson—and the Minister get a chance to contribute to this debate, so I will stop there.

4.9 pm

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson, and I thank the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) for that comment.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) for securing the time for this debate in Westminster Hall. I think that it has worked quite well here, actually. When he began his speech, his comments suggested that he did not quite trust the Government actually to deliver; I cannot imagine why. However, having had so much time to discuss the chaotic and now—frankly—reckless handling of Brexit by the Government, it is a crucial time for hon. Members to have a chance to talk about other issues affecting their constituents. However, to quickly look back, this time last year we had just voted against the Government’s attempts to sideline Parliament on the deal. That should have been the point at which the Prime Minister took a different, more inclusive path to involve MPs and Parliament in that proposal. However, it is 12 months later, and in the past few weeks we have seen the problems that have arisen as a result of not choosing that inclusive path. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) that it is irresponsible not to rule out a no-deal Brexit: it is entirely possible to do so, and to take away some of the fear and uncertainty of our constituents.

I think that all colleagues here today share a frustration that other policy areas are not being addressed, some of which we have heard about. For me, one of the most important crises facing the country is social care, and recently, the Green Paper has yet again been delayed: it has been delayed five times since summer 2017, when
we were promised it. We are now being told that it will be published at the first opportunity in 2019, so perhaps the Minister could take back to the Government the message that the first opportunity needs to come very quickly. That delay is also tied up with the NHS plan, on which I chaired a session with NHS England in Parliament last week. We know that plan is ready, but again it has been delayed, and we do not know when it is coming. That means that local health providers are facing great uncertainty at what is a very busy time for them, which is not acceptable.

We have actually passed legislation in the past year since we last rose, and although we sometimes think this place is a bit arcane, I am pleased that Dame Laura Cox’s report on bullying and harassment has been published, and that the House of Commons Commission has agreed a way forward. I hope that there will be some progress on that, and that conduct across the House will improve.

We have heard a great range of speeches today—I have enjoyed these debates when I have heard them in the past, because we get to learn an awful lot. My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead took us through a number of issues in his constituency. To me, one of the main issues was the cuts that are happening, not just to local government but to all the partnership bodies and charities that are working together, and the impact that is now having on local people. We had the usual sweep from Southend: I too am looking forward to the centenary party for the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess). The thing I learned most is that Brexit is going to happen in the Amess household on 25 December, for one day only. We all look forward to that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) reminded us of the debate that she so powerfully led in this place last year. The fact that those poor families are yet again in that so-called temporary accommodation is really scandalous. We are all aware of the issue of rent arrears from universal credit that my hon. Friend mentioned, and I would certainly like to take up her offer of more information on the great work that the WISH Centre is doing for young people—as, I am sure, would many hon. Members. I had not heard the debate about isoretinoin, but I know that the hon. Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) will keep that debate going and keep it in Members’ interests.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (John Grogan) about the trials and tribulations of the Cougars, and the breakthrough that is rugby league and rugby union co-operating on something. That has taken a number of years, so if that is happening, there is hope for all sorts of co-operation breaking out. My hon. Friend also highlighted an important issue about the scandalous lack of accountability of regional schools commissioners for the very important decisions that they are making in our communities. We have perhaps all experienced that, and I wish my hon. Friend luck in addressing that issue. Mr Robertson, you missed out on an important contribution: we have a tip for the King George VI on Boxing day. We are all going to be waiting patiently at Kempton, so that was very useful. I completely agree with my hon. Friend about Boxing day travel. Fans will be travelling from Brentford to Bristol City on Boxing day, and public transport is important every day of the year for local people, but is especially important for grounds on Boxing day. That is a really important campaign, and I wish my hon. Friend well with it.

We heard from the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) about the great work that he has been doing, particularly on housing and other issues. I commend him for his vital work on the holocaust memorial, and the importance of continually combating antisemitism in our country. From my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian, we learned a lot about cats—perhaps more than we wanted.

Martin Whitfield: Wildcats.

Karin Smyth: Yes, wildcats. I visited Edinburgh Zoo as part of the British–Irish Parliamentary Assembly this year, and it does some great work, so I wish my hon. Friend good luck with that. As I said, I agree with him about the major part of his speech: the irresponsibility of the Government on Brexit.

I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) said about the local enterprise partnerships: some are better than others, and it is for local people to help out in their communities. I look forward to the Labour Government sorting out those direct trains for him. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) talked about the issues around Coney Street, and we have all been affected by the so-called consultation by the Post Office. That is something we all recognise, and I know that my hon. Friend will make sure the Post Office does its homework better. Regarding Bootham Park Hospital, she and I have joined forces with NHS Property Services on the importance of NHS estate being part of those communities and overcoming the fragmented nature of the health service, working better to help local communities with big, important decisions. Again, my hon. Friend is right to highlight the social history of places such as our football grounds: those public spaces need to be taken into those communities and consulted with properly.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has reminded us of the debates he has raised previously about drones. What has gone on today is shocking; we have not caught up with all of it. I also agree with him about new developments—I have a number of those in my constituency—needling infrastructure when they are built, particularly GP access and school places, which help to get communities on board. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) on his first full year, and his 167 contributions to debates. Well done.

Mr Sweeney: It was 168.

Karin Smyth: Sorry, 168. I also congratulate him on the Herald award, and welcome him; he has been a great addition to Parliament.

Before I wrap up, I will take this opportunity to thank all staff for the smooth running of this place: the porters, the Clerks, the security staff, the postal staff, and the others who people perhaps do not see quite as often. I hope they get a well-deserved rest. I thank all the public services in my constituency of Bristol South, which keep our city running so well. I have spent the past year with Avon and Somerset Constabulary, working on the parliamentary scheme: that has been a real eye-opener, and I commend them on the work that they will keep doing.
Like many hon. Members, I look forward to spending the recess with my family—I hope they do too. If not, there are some great choices of activities to take part in. We have “Aladdin” and “A Christmas Carol”, and the Tobacco Factory in my constituency is turning the theatre into a giant adventure playground to tell the charming story of “The Borrowers”. Some Members might recall this story: a family of tiny people who secretly live in the walls and floors of an English house, borrowing anything they can find upstairs. Let us hope it does not come to that in the coming year. From cotton buds to crisp packets, what the Borrowers do is the original upcycling—a wonderful theme for Bristol, which prides itself on its approach to environmental issues. In previous speeches, I have urged Members to visit Ashton Gate stadium, the home of Bristol City, to watch the football or the rugby. This time, I suggest to colleagues that they “spice up their life” and “only take a minute” to get tickets to the Super Girls or Take That at the stadium—but “I don’t want to talk about” the Rod Stewart gig. On that note, I wish everyone a very merry Christmas.

The Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty’s Treasury (Paul Maynard): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Robertson. In the time I have left, I will do my best to do justice to everyone who has taken part in the debate. Christmas and the new year are a time to look backwards and a time to look forwards. Every year, Opposition Members are given the gift of hindsight, which is denied to Government Members—if only we had that hindsight. We might even get crystal balls this year, who knows? They could be rather cloudy though, as who knows what might happen in the future?

As many Members have indicated, we are currently grappling with themes of great importance and complexity, so it is worth remembering that our ability to engage in such deliberations arises from us having a mandate from our constituents. What we have heard today reminds me that what goes on in each of our constituencies gives us the insight that enables us to participate in the much more momentous and wider debates that are now taking place in the Chamber. We have also heard about the rich tapestry of voluntary activity and third-sector organisations across all our constituencies. At this time of year, more than ever, they deserve our praise.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns), not just for chairing the Backbench Business Committee, but for being so assiduous in seeking time for Back-Bench business. I share the view of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) that we should have more of it, and that it should be protected when we do have it, so that it is not squeezed by the unexpected and shifted into less sociable hours. I wish him well in that endeavour.

As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) delivered on all our expectations. I think it is fair to say that his speech was exhaustive, if not exhausting—not just for him, but for those of us who had to listen to it. I repeat my offer that if he wants Southend to get city status, I will support that if he returns the favour and backs Blackpool for city status. We can have a two-for-one. That is only fair. His comments on the girls and boys club were absolutely spot on. Blackpool has a fine girls and boys club that does so much across the town as a whole and deserves far more recognition than it sometimes gets. As for his centenarian tea party, the reason it has so many attendees is because Southend is the happiest place in Britain, and people who are happy live longer. If someone wants to be a centenarian, clearly they should move to Southend.

On a more serious note, the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh) and many other Opposition Members expressed concerns about homelessness and universal credit. I think the two are to a certain extent brought together. She was right to comment on rough sleeping. I know she was in the Chamber for the urgent question earlier today. We talked about some of the Government’s approaches through the rough sleeping strategy. From my constituency, I know some of the challenges that those who are homeless have accessing universal credit, for example. There is a need to get people from the Department for Work and Pensions into our homeless hostels to ensure that people can sign up and access the benefit, as well as set up the bank accounts they need. The accessibility of basic bank accounts is a problem I have been trying to tackle with the Department. The new Secretary of State, far from standing idly by—I gently observe that that is not the case—is trying to ensure that the benefit rolls out as effectively as possible. I recall a time when the Labour party supported the principle of what universal credit is trying to do.

I entirely recognise that Opposition Members will want to pressure us over how we deliver and roll things out—that is entirely right and proper—but representing a seaside town with a seasonal economy, I know that UC gives us an opportunity to ensure that people do not need to keep signing off and on each time their job situation changes. That they can have more secure access to benefits remains the right principle. We have to redouble our efforts to ensure that we deliver it appropriately.

I agree with the hon. Lady on many of her comments on homelessness. The hon. Member for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) cited figures on life expectancy that always shock me whenever I hear them and bring home to me why the situation is so appalling. As politicians, we obsess about rules, regulations, structures and delivery bodies. The essence of our decision making should be the dignity of each and every person. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East mentioned, one rough sleeper is one too many in any civilisation or society. He is thanked so much by the House for his work on the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 that it almost becomes commonplace, but the figures he cited show what a difference it made. We should be grateful to him for that.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) for educating me about isotretinoin and I am grateful for his input. I know he will keep on campaigning on that issue. We will ensure that the Department of Health and Social Care gets to hear about it again.

Rugby league never gets enough coverage in this place or the wider world. I was watching “North West Tonight” the other week and learned that Red Star Belgrade has started a new rugby league team. I am sure the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) will share my delight at that. The tentacles of rugby league are stretching far and wide of late. I have met Vicky Beer.
Perhaps I can brief him later on how I found the experience, rather than say it at the Dispatch Box. We will leave that there. I agree with him about Boxing day trains. The spirit was willing when I was rail Minister, but the flesh was very weak. One more push from the hon. Member for York Central (Raciala Maskell) might help deliver that. When we discuss Vicky Beer later, perhaps the hon. Member for Keighley can also explain what he thinks the UEFA nations league is actually about. I still do not understand the consequence of it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East spoke powerfully about religious freedom, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). I learnt more from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East about the various religious calendars of the world’s religions than I ever did as a good Catholic boy—holy days of obligation only! I am grateful to him for that educational activity, if nothing else.

I am also grateful to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield) who spoke about nature issues. I had not really thought about the Scottish wildcat until today, and he has broadened my sum of knowledge. I am also grateful to him for mentioning, even briefly, the issue of invisible disabilities. It was one of the key things that I wanted in the transport accessibility paper I did at the end of my time as Rail Minister. He may wish to look at that paper to see what can be borrowed to implement in Scotland. We were trying to be as fertile as possible with our ideas.

I am so glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers) is now tipping his constituency to be the queen of the east coast, because there is no vacancy for the best seaside resort generally. I say, as the MP for Blackpool, that that was a sensible move on his part. He has reminded me that my time as Rail Minister has a long legacy, as we have only just heard from the Office of Rail and Road about its sudden new-found enthusiasm for open access rail. Actually, that has taken about 10 years, rather than the one since I was the Minister. My new ombudsman was launched last week, which I am keen to point out in the one time I get to be at the Dispatch Box.

The hon. Member for York Central reminds me of what I have been missing since we last sparred in debates, which we did all too often. I might actually start to agree with her, because I had a Crown post office in the heart of Blackpool, and it too was moved into a WH Smith. That was not just into a corner, but into the basement where no one had a chance of seeing it, and there were accessibility issues. I urge the hon. Lady to keep fighting on that one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford rightly spoke about drones, which are an issue he was so perspicacious in debating a year ago. We all get the sense of urgency on the issue, given what happened at Gatwick. I was also delighted to hear about the high-speed washing machines that he referred to. All my constituents know that if they want to find me, they have to visit the local Costa Coffee. Now, when I am sitting in there, I can think of the washing machines whirring away behind the scenes to make sure I have a clean cup each time.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North East has been reviewing his statistics as he finishes his first full year. As someone who used to do that, can I warn him that the tyranny of TheyWorkForYou.com can be an unpredictable guide to future activity? The further he shins up the greasy pole, the fewer his opportunities to participate might be. As Scottish MP of the year, he is clearly destined for great things, and he will perhaps find that he has fewer and fewer opportunities to speak. I was trying to decode his tie—tartan fading into grey. Is it some hidden message to the SNP? I do not know. I was trying to work it out.

Mr Sweeney: Just for the record, the tie is actually a gift that I received from Home-Start Glasgow North, which is a charity that helps people with childcare. It was a very nice gift. I think the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) has the same tie, so there is an ecumenical approach to us wearing it.

Paul Maynard: I am glad to hear it. I know that Home-Start is a very fine charity in all its branches across the country, so I am happy to pay tribute to it.

I was delighted to hear that the hon. Gentleman is such a fan of the Glasgow School of Art. The one time I went to Glasgow was especially to see that very building, so I certainly wish him well with that.

I will end by making the observation that one of our biggest challenges as Members is to maintain our good will, even in this season of good will. I always try, particularly when participating in this debate, to recognise that we all ultimately want the same thing: to make the lives of our constituents better and to make the common future of the country a better place. We may differ over the paths that we take to get there—some of us more than most, perhaps—but I like to think that for the vast bulk of us in the moderate mainstream, there is far more that unites us than divides us.

When I hear the rancour of some debates, it genuinely saddens me, because it makes it harder to reach the best decision in the national interest. When we have had such a divisive and rancorous period since the referendum, it is incumbent on all Members, even when we disagree on the fundamentals, to recognise that what underlies that is a desire for the best outcome for the nation as a whole.

In the final minute, it would be remiss of me not to thank you, Mr Robertson, for chairing the debate, the whole Panel of Chairs, the Deputy Speakers, Mr Speaker himself, the House staff, the catering staff, the parliamentary security, the cleaners, the librarians, and everyone else. I apologise to anyone I have missed out, but I thank them anyway as well.

I end by asking us all to remember those who are facing their first Christmas alone, those who may have lost loved ones over the course of the year, and those who may face significant hardship at this time of year. It is a time when we turn to our families, but some people have no family to turn to and do not have those opportunities. Although it is a time of great good will to all and good cheer, it can also be a very bleak time for many people, and I am sure that what will unite all of us in the Chamber is to think of everyone in our constituencies and to wish them the best for the year to come, and to hope that we get the very best outcome that we can, whatever happens in our crystal ball, on 14 January.

Mr Laurence Robertson (in the Chair): Best wishes to everyone from the Chair as well.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Written Statements

Monday 10 December 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Limited Partnership Law

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): The Government have published their response to their consultation on the reform of limited partnership law.

A key theme of the UK’s industrial strategy is ensuring the UK has a world-leading business environment, which holds the confidence of investors, employees, consumers and the public. An important element of this is the provision of a range of business structures through which a variety of commercial objectives can be achieved.

Limited partnerships play an important role in private fund structures used by private equity, real estate and infrastructure managers. In recent years however it has been reported that limited partnerships in some circumstances have been used for illicit purposes. The Government recognise that robust action is required.

The reforms set out in the Government’s response include: tightening of registration requirements for limited partnerships, ensuring that those applying to register limited partnerships demonstrate that they are registered and supervised by an official anti-money laundering supervisor; requiring limited partnerships to demonstrate a firmer connection to the UK; increasing transparency requirements; and enabling the Registrar to strike from the companies register limited partnerships which are dissolved or which are no longer carrying on business.

The Government have worked closely with industry in developing these reforms and considers that they strike the right balance between preventing the abuse of limited partnerships while ensuring they remain attractive to legitimate commercial activity.

The reforms require primary legislation and the Government will legislate when parliamentary time allows.

The Government response will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1160]

TREASURY

Anti-money Laundering and Counter-terrorism Financing regime

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen): The UK is one of the world’s largest and most open economies, and a leading global financial centre. That brings it with the heightened risk of illicit financial flows from money laundering and terrorist financing. The Government are committed to tackling the threat that this presents to our security and prosperity. The Government have taken robust action over recent years to clamp down on illicit finance, protecting our citizens and helping legitimate businesses to thrive.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is the global standard setter for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing (AML/CTF). The FATF published its mutual evaluation report of the United Kingdom on Friday 7 December. The report recognises that the UK’s AML/CTF regime is the strongest of the over 60 countries assessed by FATF and its regional bodies to date.

The UK received the highest rating possible in four out of the 11 areas of the report, and received a rating of “substantial” in a further four areas. In particular, the report highlights the UK’s efforts on:

- Taking significant steps to understand and coordinate the UK’s response to the threat of illicit finance, including publishing two national risk assessments in 2015 and 2017;
- Working with international partners to tackle illicit finance, through a strong legal framework and a liaison network spanning over 160 jurisdictions;
- Aggressively investigating and prosecuting money laundering, with over 1,400 convictions a year, and adopting new tools such as unexplained wealth orders;
- Using all available measures to disrupt terrorist financing, including criminal justice measures, confiscating funds, and financial sanctions;
- Preventing the misuse of companies and trusts, and acting as a global leader by adopting a public register of company beneficial ownership and a register of trusts with tax consequences;
- Promoting effective global use and implementation of financial sanctions against terrorists and against proliferation of weapons of mass destruction;

The Government recognise that there is more to be done and is progressing with a series of measures to redouble its fight against economic crime.

The National Economic Crime Centre (NECC), housed within the National Crime Agency, has recently been launched. Tasked with co-ordinating the national response to economic crime, the NECC will ensure operations achieve the greatest sustained impact on threats the UK faces, and will lead a new approach to economic crime in the UK.

In line with this, the UK will take forward its ambitious reform of the suspicious activity reporting regime. This will provide an improved IT system to help the UK’s Financial Intelligence Unit (UKFIU) process, analyse and distribute the nearly 500,000 SARs received annually by UKFIU, and will also drive up the quality and use of SARs across the UK’s system. The NCA is increasing the staffing of the UKFIU by more than 30% this year, with further increases envisaged in future years.

The Government plan to legislate in 2019 to introduce a register of beneficial ownership for overseas entities which own or purchase UK property, which is being developed by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). The Government also plan to take further action to mitigate the risks presented by the misuse of limited partnerships, in line with the consultation response published today by BEIS. In addition, BEIS will look further at controls over who registers companies in the UK, what information they have to provide, and how assurance is provided over that information.

The 2017 National Risk Assessment noted the steps that UK supervisors are taking to strengthen their approaches and collaboration in the fight against illicit
finance. Complementing this ongoing work, the Government launched the office for professional body AML supervision (OPBAS) earlier this year, which will continue its work with supervisors to help improve standards and consistency across the UK’s regime.

The FATF report underlines where more work can be done and will help to focus these efforts over the coming years. The Government are considering the recommendations in the report and will publish their response to these in due course.

A copy of the report has been deposited in the Libraries of both House. [HCWS1162]

DEFENCE

Type 31e Frigate

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Stuart Andrew): I am pleased to inform the House that the Ministry of Defence (MOD) has taken a major step forward in the competition to build five Type 31e frigates.

On 10 December 2018 the MOD awarded three contracts for the competitive design phase. The contracts have been awarded to consortia led by BAE Systems, Babcock and Atlas Elektronik UK and are valued at up to £5 million each.

The competitive design phase is the first stage of the design process which will allow suppliers to demonstrate how they can deliver the Royal Navy’s threshold capability by the target date and within budget. These contracts will fund industry to prepare detailed proposals for the design and build of the five Type 31e frigates.

Concurrent with the award of the competitive design phase contracts, the MOD has issued to each consortium an invitation to negotiate for the single design and build contract that we intend to place by the end of 2019.

Conducting the competitive design phase in parallel with the design and build contract negotiations will allow the award of the design and build contract earlier than would be normally the case in a major procurement.

It remains our intention to seek a firm price contract for five ships, less an amount of Government furnished equipment, for £1.25 billion, giving an average price of £250 million per ship. We want the first ship in 2023, with all five ships delivered by the end of 2028. The Government remain committed to a surface fleet of at least 19 frigates and destroyers.

This contractual milestone is a tangible and positive result of the national shipbuilding strategy published in September 2017. The strategy sets out how the Government intend to work with industry to develop a strong and globally competitive UK shipbuilding and marine engineering sector. The Type 31e procurement is seeking to maximise the UK prosperity and export potential, without compromising on cost and time.

The award of the competitive design phase contracts is a testament to the MOD’S positive engagement with industry and the commitment to move the programme forward. [HCWS1161]
£11 million of the 2019-20 Rough Sleeping Initiative funding, which will be targeted at local authorities not funded through the Rough Sleeping Initiative this year.

**Delivery plan**

The Rough Sleeping Strategy is a £100 million package of commitments focused around prevention, intervention and recovery: introducing necessary policies and programmes to help those who find themselves on the streets today, and laying the groundwork for our 2027 vision in which rough sleeping is prevented and those who do find themselves at crisis point are quickly supported into settled accommodation with appropriate support. It is a cross-Government effort, with contributions from seven Departments, all focused on achieving our commitment to halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it by 2027.

The delivery plan sets out detailed progress on many of the key commitments made in the strategy, including our new rapid rehousing pathway, which brings together funding for new specialist navigators, local lettings agencies, supported lettings, and our new Somewhere Safe to Stay rapid assessment hubs. It provides an update on ongoing work such as the Rough Sleeping Initiative and the three Government-backed Housing First pilots. It sets out key milestones and expected delivery dates for each of the 61 commitments made, and also highlights just a few of the projects we have funded, and people we have already helped.

The delivery plan sets out further detail on the expert adviser team we have put in place to deliver the Rough Sleeping Initiative, with combined experience across central and local government, housing associations, frontline services and the voluntary sector. Since their appointment this summer, our specialist advisers have been working closely with local authorities and visiting them regularly, supporting them to mobilise funding and get new projects up and running. The Rough Sleeping Initiative advisers will continue to work closely with local authorities over the coming months to monitor and maximise the impact of the initiative, as well as feeding back the challenges faced on the ground, enabling us to be responsive to changing circumstances.

In the strategy, we were clear that the work set out thus far is the first step towards achieving our goal, and as such committed to publishing an annual update to the strategy. In this delivery plan, we confirm that this annual update will comprise an update on progress, detail of any new programmes or policies we are bringing forward, and an updated delivery plan for the coming year.

**Further £11 million for the 2019-20 Rough Sleeping Initiative**

In the strategy we announced £45 million of funding for the Rough Sleeping Initiative next year, in addition to the £30 million funding provided this year. In September we provisionally allocated £34 million of that funding to the areas who have been part of the initial phase of the Rough Sleeping Initiative. The remaining £11 million will be focused on those areas which have not yet been funded through the Rough Sleeping Initiative, which can demonstrate that they are developing partnerships, plans and effective interventions to achieve the goal of reducing the numbers of people sleeping on the streets of their area. Local authorities that already receive Rough Sleeping Initiative funds could apply only as part of a partnership bid across local authorities.

The Rough Sleeping Initiative will have direct oversight of how this funding is delivered. This tailored approach will ensure interventions are planned on the basis of need, the existing provision and service gaps in each area and that funding is directed to the places where it will have most impact.

The types of interventions we expect to fund include increased outreach provision, floating support, and accommodation options to help rough sleepers off the street.

Over the next few weeks, local authorities will submit initial bids and the expert Rough Sleeping Initiative adviser team will then help to refine proposals before final bids are submitted in February.

**INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Global Compact for Migration**

The Minister for the Middle East (Alistair Burt): I am writing to update the House on the UK’s endorsement of the global compact for safe, orderly and regular migration, which we will announce at the intergovernmental launch event in Marrakesh on 10 December.

**Overview**

Well-managed migration is in everyone’s interests. But uncontrolled migration erodes public confidence, damages economies, and places people on the move in situations of great vulnerability. The UK is taking significant steps, including with our ODA-funded programming, to tackle uncontrolled migration by:

- Addressing the root causes of migration, through our targeted assistance for livelihoods, healthcare, education and economic development;
- Tackling modern slavery and organised immigration crime;
- Supporting enhanced border management overseas;
- Providing critical humanitarian support and protection for vulnerable migrants, as well as offering voluntary return and vital reintegration support to those wishing to return home; and
- Supporting refugees to stay in a first safe country through our humanitarian and development work in Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

The global compact for migration embeds these efforts within the international system and enhances co-operation between states whilst reaffirming the sovereign right of all countries to control their own borders. The compact is not legally binding. It creates a framework to allow countries to work together to make global migration more beneficial for everyone.

**UK endorsement of the global compact for migration**

On 10 December, the UK will endorse the global compact for migration (GCM) at the intergovernmental launch event in Marrakesh.

The migration compact marks a major milestone for the international community. No country can address the challenges presented by illegal migration on its own and an agreement on this scale, with the overwhelming support of the international community including endorsements from 165 other UN member states including France, Germany, Canada and Japan, highlights the need for global co-operation.

The compact will not, and is not intended to, affect our continued ability to determine and implement our own migration policy in our national interest. The
Compact will not in any way create legal obligations for states, nor does it seek to establish international customary law or further interpret existing treaties or national obligations. It protects every country’s right to determine its own immigration policies, including in areas such as asylum, border controls and returns of illegal migrants. The GCM emphasises that migrants are entitled to the same universal human rights as any human being, and does not create any new “rights” for migrants. As a result, the UK does not interpret the compact as being in conflict with its current domestic policies. At the same time, the compact will help us take important steps to keep migrants around the world safe and to protect the most vulnerable, domestically and overseas, who can become victims of modern slavery. The compact also sets out actions to harness the economic benefits of safer, regular migration, for example by reducing the costs of remittances that migrants send home.

I believe the end result serves the UK’s national interest. The Prime Minister set out the UK’s priorities for global migration reform in 2016 and, taken together, the refugee compact and the migration compact help embed these priorities into global migration governance. In practice, that means a refugee compact that helps ensure refugees can claim asylum in the first safe country they reach. And a migration compact which makes a clear distinction between refugees and migrants, and which sets out a well-managed global migration system confirming the sovereign right of States to control their borders and the clear responsibility of states to accept the return of their nationals who no longer have the right to remain elsewhere.

It also includes proposals which will help the UK make a strong contribution to the delivery of the global sustainable development goals, including through our ODA-funded programming. This includes those relating to orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people; and those intended to eradicate forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking, and child labour.

Next steps

After the political launch in Marrakesh, the document will need to be adopted by the UN General Assembly in New York. As part of this process, the UK will issue an explanation of position, alongside likeminded EU member states which will publicly capture the UK’s interpretation of the text.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The Government, the Mayor of London and Transport for London (TfL) have today 10 December 2018 confirmed a financing package to deliver the final stages of the Crossrail project and open the Elizabeth line to passengers.

Crossrail Ltd, a wholly owned subsidiary of TfL, announced in August 2018 that the opening of the Elizabeth line through central London would be delayed. Work is ongoing to identify the remaining works required to complete the infrastructure and then commence the extensive testing necessary to ensure the railway opens safely and reliably. Crossrail is a nationally significant infrastructure project which will add up to £42 billion to the UK economy and will transform travel in, to, and across London.

The Government remain committed to the rapid completion of the project, in a way that is fair to UK taxpayers, and that enables London—as the primary beneficiary of Crossrail—to bear the additional costs. Independent reviews into Crossrail Ltd’s assessment of ongoing funding requirements and governance arrangements are being undertaken by KPMG to ensure the right scrutiny and oversight are in place as the project enters its final phase.

The emerging findings of the KPMG reviews into Crossrail Ltd’s finances indicate the likely range of additional capital cost due to the delayed opening of the central section could be in the region of between £1.6 billion and £2 billion. That includes the £300 million already contributed by the Department for Transport and TfL in July 2018, leaving between £1.3 billion and £1.7 billion to cover the predicted additional costs of the project.

The Government, the Mayor of London and TfL have agreed a financial package to cover this. The Department for Transport will provide a loan of up to £1.3 billion to the Greater London Authority (GLA). The GLA intend to repay this loan via London’s Business Rate Supplement (BRS) and from the Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy (MCIL). The GLA will also provide a £100 million cash contribution, taking its total contribution for this package to £1.4 billion.

As the final costs of the Crossrail project are yet to be confirmed, a contingency arrangement has also been agreed between TfL and the Department for Transport. The Department for Transport will loan TfL up to £750 million in the event that further finance is required for the project.

This combined financing deal will replace the need for the £350 million interim financing package announced by the Department for Transport in October 2018.

The combined total of the financing arrangements outlined above, means that the overall funding envelope for the project is now £17.6 billion.

Crossrail Ltd appointed Mark Wild as CEO on 19 November 2018. Mark is now conducting an extensive review of the remainder of the programme and will provide clarity in the New Year on the opening date of future phases. Crossrail Ltd are working to establish a robust and deliverable schedule to open a safe and reliable railway. This will also provide greater clarity on the level of additional funding required.

Furthermore, both the Department for Transport and TfL have recommended to the Crossrail Ltd Board that they appoint Tony Meggs as Chair. Tony Meggs was previously chief executive of the infrastructure and projects authority and Head of Government’s project delivery function, following a 30 year career in the private sector leading major projects at global, regional and local levels.

To further strengthen the Crossrail Ltd Board, the Department for Transport have accepted TfL’s nomination of Nick Raynsford as Deputy Chair. Nick is a former MP and served as Minister for London on two occasions between 1997 and 2003.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Clinical Waste: Healthcare Environmental Services

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): I am today taking the opportunity to update the House about a company which provides clinical waste services to NHS Trusts.

This company—Healthcare Environmental Services (HES)—was subject to previous discussions in Parliament. On 9 October, the then Minister of State for Health, set out concerns that a number of waste storage and treatment sites were well over the permitted levels. This included waste collected from hospitals and other public services. Although the waste was stored securely, the Environment Agency was sufficiently concerned at the activities of this company that they took regulatory action, including launching a criminal investigation.

At the start of October, a number of trusts served by HES’ Normanton site, terminated their contracts, and arranged for Mitie to provide waste collection and incineration services instead.

Until last week, a number of other NHS trusts continued to receive services from HES. Those organisations, supported by NHSI and the Department of Health and Social Care, have been monitoring the situation.

However, HES has now failed to collect waste from 24 further trusts. NHSI has sought assurance from HES that it has not ceased trading and is capable of, and will continue to provide services. Such assurance has not been forthcoming. Contingency arrangements are in place for each of the affected trusts. An optional extension in the Mitie contract has been exercised, which will allow all affected trusts to access a replacement clinical waste collection service. This has been communicated to all Trusts and NHSI is working with affected trusts to mobilise and implement contingency plans.

These robust contingency measures mean there is no gap in service provision and no health risk to the public.

The unquantifiable contingent liability will remain for the duration of the JIT operations, likely to be a period of 12 months, plus six years.

If the liability is called against JIT, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

[HCWS1169]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Joint Inspection Team: Contingent Liability

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): I am today laying a departmental minute to advise that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) has received approval from Her Majesty’s Treasury for a contingent liability associated with the joint inspection team (JIT) advisory role to local authorities.

The departmental minute describes the contingent liability that MHCLG will hold as a result of the JIT providing advice to the local authority. The local authority is still responsible for making decisions on enforcement.

The unquantifiable contingent liability will remain for the duration of the JIT operations, likely to be a period of 12 months, plus six years.

If the liability is called against JIT, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal Supply procedure.

[HCWS1169]

TRANSPORT

EU Transport Council

The Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling): I attended the only formal Transport Council under the Austrian presidency (the presidency) in Brussels on Monday 3 December.

The Council reached general approaches on the social and market pillars of the first tranche of the ‘Mobility Package’. The ‘social pillar’ is intended to establish a specific regulatory regime for the posting of workers in the road transport sector; and, the ‘market pillar’ is intended to introduce new regulatory requirements for the operation of light commercial vehicles (vans); and to modify the ‘cabotage’ rules for vehicles operating in countries other than their country of establishment.

I welcomed the work that the presidency had done to achieve compromises on these challenging proposals, give the range of view from member states. During the discussion, I pressed for a further reduction in the proposed cabotage ‘cooling-off period’ (a period of time between cabotage operations) and for extending the period after which a vehicle should return to base to 10 weeks. After a lengthy debate a compromise was reached which included the reduction of the ‘cabotage’ cooling-off period to five days; clarifying when the posting of workers rules would apply to different haulage operations; removing altogether the requirement for the return of the vehicle; and retaining the original proposal to ban drivers from taking weekly rest in the cabin of their vehicles.

Following this, the Council reached a general approach on a proposal from the second tranche of the ‘Mobility package’, to amend the current directive on combined transport. The existing directive liberalises cabotage operations when part of a freight journey that comprises a rail or sea leg. The general approach included an amendment to these cabotage provisions in line with the earlier compromise on cabotage rules.

The Council reached a general approach on the proposed directive on road infrastructure safety management (RISM), from the third tranche of the ‘Mobility Package’.

The lunchtime debate consisted of Ministers discussing how to address airspace capacity constraints and was followed by presentations from Eurocontrol Director General, Eamonn Brennan and Transport Commissioner, Violeta Bulc.

Later, the Council reached two general approaches on the proposed directive on minimum level of training for seafarers and the proposed regulation establishing a European maritime single window. In addition, the Council adopted conclusions on inland waterway transport.
The Council reached a partial general approach on the Connecting Europe Facility (CEF), endorsing the text presented by the presidency. The outstanding elements are those subject to horizontal negotiations on the multi-annual financial framework beyond 2020.

The Council noted the presidency’s progress reports on discontinuing seasonal changes of time, rail passenger rights, streamlining the trans-European transport network, clean and energy efficient vehicles and electronic freight transport information.

Finally, there were several information points from member states, the presidency and Commissioner Bulc under any other business. The presidency updated Council on the provisional agreements reached with the European Parliament on electronic road tolling and exchange of information, safeguarding competition in air transport and aviation wet-leasing. Commissioner Bulc noted good progress in on-going EU-ASEAN aviation negotiations that she hoped would conclude this year. In reply to a joint declaration from Luxembourg, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany and the Netherlands on the social agenda in aviation, Commissioner Bulc noted that she would present a progress report on the social agenda identifying actions for potential completion. Ireland intervened to defend the value of new business models in aviation. Commissioner Bulc also drew attention to the 17 December conference on sustainable transport infrastructure charging and internalisation of transport externalities to be held in Brussels. The presidency provided an update on the EU’s space programme and the outcome of the informal meeting of Transport and Environment Ministers held in Graz on the 29-30 October 2018. Finally, Romania presented transport plans for its incoming presidency of the Council of the European Union.

[HCWS1167]
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary for State for the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Lord Henley) has made the following statement:

The Competitiveness Council took place on 29 and 30 November. The UK was represented by the right hon. Lord Henley, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, on day 1 (internal market and industry); and by Katrina Williams, deputy permanent representative to the EU, on day 2 (research and space).

Day 1 (Internal Market and Industry)

The Council agreed a general approach on the platform-to-business regulation and to entering into inter-institutional negotiations with the European Parliament; these are anticipated to begin later this month. The UK welcomed the evidence-based approach taken by the Council; we consider that the compromise text meets the demand from business users for transparency without stifling development and innovation of online platforms. Others indicated that they could support the general approach but had hoped for more ambition for further regulation. Other member states urged the presidency to uphold the Commission’s light-touch approach in talks with the Parliament, with some underlining that it was too soon to consider stricter rules. The UK joined the Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Latvia and Poland in signing a joint statement to the minutes expressing reservations about new provisions for public enforcement.

The Council adopted a partial general approach on the single market programme. The UK noted that, while it generally supported the programme’s aims, it retained a parliamentary scrutiny reserve over this dossier and therefore abstained. The Council also adopted a general approach on the general safety of vehicles regulation.

The Council adopted conclusions on “A Future EU Industrial Policy Strategy”. The Commission highlighted the link to its long-term strategy on climate, published on 28 November.

Commission Vice-President Katainen presented the Commission’s recent communication on the future of the single market. He urged member states to adopt outstanding legislation in the remaining months of this legislature. Some member states noted a recently published report on trade in services as evidence of the persistent barriers in this area. Member states also noted the potential of digitalisation and cross-border data flows to boost the competitiveness of EU services and manufacturing. The UK noted the important economic links that would continue between the UK and EU after the UK’s exit, and the shared challenges we face, particularly around digitalisation. Other member states highlighted the role of social, environmental, regional and transport policy in the functioning of the single market.

Ministers received information on the recently agreed changes to the state aid enabling regulation, and on the negotiations on supplementary protection certificates for medicinal products where the UK advocated maintaining the scope of the original Commission proposal. The Council noted the annual report of the SME envoy network and received information from the incoming Romanian presidency about its priorities.

Day 2 (Research and Space)

The Council began with a progress report and an exchange of views on the regulation establishing the space programme of the Union. The discussion focused on governance, and in particular on the importance of clearly defined roles and responsibilities for all actors involved in delivering the programme. Access to space and how to maximise the competitiveness of the European space sector were also discussed.

The Council agreed on the conclusions on the governance of the European research area. The Council then discussed the Horizon Europe package—the framework programme for research and innovation 2021-27. The debate centred on four outstanding issues: the overall structure of the programme; return grants for Skłodowska-Curie actions; capping for partnership budgets; and the European Innovation Council. The Austrian presidency redrafted the regulation text following member states’ interventions and the UK was content with the final version. The Council then agreed a partial general approach for the framework programme and its rules for participation and dissemination. The Austrian presidency also presented a progress report on the specific programme implementing Horizon Europe.

During any other business the Austrian presidency provided information on the conference “Evolution of Europe’s space activities: Long-term perspective” held in Graz, 5 and 6 November 2018. The Romanian delegation then concluded the Council by outlining the work programme of the incoming presidency.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Overseas Charging Regulations Review 2017

The Minister for Health (Stephen Hammond): On 16 November 2017, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Steve Brine) announced to the House that my Department would be conducting a review into the impact of amendments made to the NHS charging regulations in 2017, with particular regard to any impact on vulnerable groups and those with protected characteristics.

The review is now complete, and the evidence received demonstrated that there is no significant evidence that the 2017 amendment regulations have led to overseas visitors being deterred from treatment or that the changes have had an impact on public health.

I am pleased that the review has shown that the 2017 amendment regulations are largely working in the way they were intended. These changes were, amongst other things, made to enshrine in law that overseas visitors not eligible for free care must pay for any non-urgent treatment upfront, to help reduce the need to chase up charges, and to remove the anomaly whereby the healthcare setting or provider type could determine whether services would be charged for or not.

Some case studies presented did reveal that there is more to do to ensure some groups of vulnerable overseas visitors understand their entitlements and treatment options, and that providers of NHS care consider fully
when a patient can be reasonably expected to leave the
UK before deciding if treatment should be safely withheld
if payment is not provided.

We will continue to work to ensure that these issues
are addressed, so that the charging regulations are
implemented in as fair a way as possible. We will improve
information and support for NHS staff and patients
and work with stakeholders and interest groups to
ensure that key messages and safeguards are understood
by all.

To ensure clinicians, NHS and community care staff
fully understand our guidance and how it should be
implemented in practice, we will revise and relaunch
our focused e-learning training programme, and work
with NHS Improvement’s support teams to promote it.
This will ensure that all relevant aspects of overseas
visitors’ personal circumstances are taken into consideration
when clinicians decide whether treatment is immediately
necessary.

To combat any misconceptions around how the cost
recovery regulations affect access to care, the Department
and NHS Improvement will continue the close partnership
with community groups and stakeholders representing
vulnerable individuals to develop user-friendly, culturally-
appropriate guidance, and ensure this reaches those
who may be impacted by this policy.

Finally, we will continue to work closely with NHS
Improvement and frontline staff to keep the impact of
the regulations and these further actions under very
close review, and to provide additional support and
guidance to organisations implementing the regulations
in different settings in the best interests of patients.

[HCWS1174]

HOME DEPARTMENT

EU Internal Security Fund: Opt-in Decision

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick
Hurd): The Government have decided not to opt in
(under the UK’s JHA opt-in protocol) to a proposal
establishing an internal security fund (2021-27). The
intended fund would not come into operation until the
start of the next multiannual financial framework (2021),
after the UK has exited the European Union and after
the currently envisaged end of the proposed implementation
period. As such, the UK would not be able to benefit
from the fund as a member state.

In addition, the UK did not opt in to the previous
iteration of the ISF as it provided no benefits to the UK
beyond our own domestic capabilities. There is no evidence
that this situation has changed, and that the ISF would
remain a poor fit for UK policing needs. The benefits
are unlikely to outweigh the cost of UK participation,
and there was therefore no practical reason to opt in.

Until the UK leaves the EU it remains a full member,
and the Government will continue to consider the
application of the UK’s opt-in to EU legislation in the
area of Justice and Home Affairs on a case by case
basis, with a view to maximising our country’s security,
protecting our civil liberties and enhancing our ability
to control immigration.

[HCWS1173]

Police Custody: Deaths and Serious Incidents Review

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick
Hurd): On 30 October 2017, the right hon. Dame Elish
Angiolini DBE QC’s independent review of deaths and
serious incidents in police custody was published, alongside
the Government’s substantive response.

As part of their response, the Government commissioned
the Ministerial Council on Deaths in Custody to play a
leading role in considering Dame Elish’s most complex
recommendations. Today, as co-chair of the Ministerial
Board on Deaths In Custody—alongside Jackie Doyle-Price
MP and Rory Stewart OBE MP—I report on the progress
made in delivering this work programme.

We have made good progress in addressing Dame
Elish’s recommendations, although, of course, there
remains more to do. First, we have focused on support
for families, which includes work on the provision of
legal aid for bereaved families, making inquests more
sympathetic to their needs and improving the information
available immediately after an incident. Secondly, we
have worked to ensure that organisations are held to
account when a death in police custody occurs. We have
reformed the Independent Office for Police Conduct to
strengthen its independence and improve the timeliness
of its investigations, and we have introduced reforms to
strengthen the police discipline regime. Thirdly, and
above all, we are committed to preventing deaths in
police custody. We have significantly restricted the use
of police stations as places of safety, the National
Police Chiefs’ Council is driving progress in national
training and assessing the health of detainees, and the
Government are investing record levels in mental health,
among other measures.

Every death in police custody is a tragedy. The impact
is devastating on their loved ones. Dame Elish’s report
has been a catalyst for change, and in my role as
co-chair of the Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody,
I am determined that we sustain momentum in addressing
the difficult issues at hand.

We will deliver a year two work programme which
will continue to prioritise preventing deaths in police
custody and in the tragic instances that they do occur,
holding organisations to account and improving support
for families.

I would like to thank Dame Elish again for her
far-reaching contribution to this important issue, and
Deborah Coles, who advised Dame Elish’s review, for
her continued passion to enact change. Most importantly,
I would like to thank the families who contributed to
Dame Elish’s review and who continue to share their
experiences so that we can learn from them.

I am placing a copy of our progress update in the
Library of the House and on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS1172]

Anti-corruption Strategy

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben
Wallace): Today, I am publishing the first annual update
on the UK anti-corruption strategy 2017 to 2022. The
Government committed to providing an annual written
update to Parliament on progress. The UK anti-corruption
strategy provides a framework to guide Government anti-corruption policies and actions and this update highlights the action we have taken since its launch in 2017. It details the significant progress we have made, including actions taken to meet the commitments that were due by the end of 2018.

The UK has a good track record in combatting corruption. We are ranked as jointly the eighth least corrupt country by Transparency International and, last week, we received the highest ever ranking from the Financial Action Task Force for our efforts against money-laundering and counter-terrorism. We recognise, however, that there is more to do. Corruption undermines confidence in our institutions, threatens our security and damages our business interests, making it harder for our companies to compete internationally. This is why we have committed at least £48 million over the next 18 months for the serious and organised crime strategy, which consists of a package of capabilities to tackle economic crime and illicit finance, including the launch of the national economic crime centre. In addition, the £45 million prosperity fund global anti-corruption programme, approved in October 2018, will work with partner Governments to promote inclusive sustainable growth and increase global prosperity through tackling corruption. The Government will continue to combat corruption and to promote integrity and transparency at home and overseas, working with international allies and at international forums to raise standards and to promote collective action.

A copy of the report will be placed in the Library of the House and will be available on the gov.uk website.

[HCWS1170]
Written Statements
Thursday 13 December 2018

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations (RFCAs) combined annual report and accounts for 2017-18. I am very grateful to the RFCAs for their valuable work in support of the reserve forces and the cadet organisations. I should also like to thank Lieutenant General (Retd) Robin Brims for all he has done as chairman of the Council of RFCAs, as he prepares to step down from the role at the end of the year.

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telecommunications Council

The Minister for Digital and the Creative Industries (Margot James): The telecommunications formation of the Transport, Telecommunications and Energy Council took place in Brussels on 4 December 2018. The deputy permanent representative to the EU, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

The Council began with the formal adoption of legislative “A” points, during which the Council adopted the European electronic communications code (EECC) and body of European regulators of electronic communications (BEREC) proposals. The Austrian presidency then secured a partial general approach on the digital Europe programme, which the UK supported. A progress report and policy debate then took place on the European cybersecurity industrial, technology and research competence centre and the network of national co-ordination centres proposal. Following this, a progress report and exchange of views took place on the ePrivacy regulation.

Afterwards, the Austrian presidency provided information on the progress of current legislative proposals, namely: the recast public sector information directive; the EU top level domain regulation; and the Cybersecurity Act. The Austrian presidency also provided an update on the state of play of the digital single market. The Council ended with a presentation from the incoming Romanian presidency on their work programme for the first half of 2019 and their priorities for the digital single market. These were: innovation; cybersecurity; skills; and women in tech.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Agriculture and Fisheries Council

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): As the provisional agenda stands, the only item for fisheries will be a Council regulation on Atlantic and North sea TACs and quotas for 2019, for which a political agreement is sought.

The primary focus for agriculture will be on the post-2020 common agriculture policy (CAP) reform package. Council will consider a progress report, covering three regulations: one on CAP strategic plans; a second on financing, management and monitoring of the CAP; and a third on common market organisation (CMO) of agriculture products.

Council will also hold an exchange of views on the updated EU bio-economy strategy.

There are currently six items scheduled for discussion under any other business:

- information from the Croatian delegation on the inter-parliamentary conference “The role of Parliaments in shaping the future of food and farming” (Zagreb, 22-23 November 2018)
- information from the Commission on the current legislative proposal on a regulation amending regulations (EU) No. 1305/2013 and (EU) No. 1307/2013 as regards certain rules on direct payments and support for rural development in respect of the years 2019 and 2020
- information from the presidency on the conference “The development of Plant Proteins in the European Union—Opportunities and Challenges” (Vienna, 22-23 November 2018)
- information from the presidency on massive forest damage in Europe
- information from the Commission on the follow-up to the Fipronil incident: state of play of implementation
- information from the Danish delegation on the establishment of an international centre for antimicrobial resistance solutions (ICARS) to strengthen the fight against AMR internationally and especially in low and middle-income countries.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Chemical Weapons Convention

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): On 19 and 20 November 2018, 160 states parties to the chemical weapons convention (CWC) met for the annual conference of states parties (CSP) to discuss implementation of the CWC and agree the annual budget for the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). This was the first CSP since the UK and international partners called a special session in June 2018 to address the threat from chemical weapons use following recent use in Syria and Salisbury.

The former Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), updated the House on the June special session on 9 July 2018 (HCWS835 and HLWS809). The November CSP was vital to consolidating the success achieved in June and implementing the decision to enable the OPCW to attribute responsibility for chemical weapons attacks in Syria, and potentially more widely at the request of an affected state party.

On 20 November, states parties overwhelmingly rejected attempts by Russia, Iran, China and Syria to reverse the June decision. Equally importantly, the CSP voted by 99 votes to 27 to adopt the budget proposed by the OPCW director-general for 2019. This included a 2.4% increase to the budget specifically to fund part of the Syria
The UK is proud to have been at the forefront of diplomatic efforts to secure this positive outcome. We look forward to supporting the OPCW technical secretariat and fellow states parties to enable Syria attribution arrangements to become operational as quickly as possible, and to further discussion of the director-general’s proposals on verification and technical assistance work, including attribution work beyond Syria.

The five yearly review conference, designed to review the operation of the convention, immediately followed the CSP. This year consensus on a final report from the review conference was not possible. This was in part due to Syrian and Russian refusal to include references to Syrian regime responsibility for chemical weapons use, including the findings by the OPCW-UN joint investigative mechanism. A lack of a formal report is unprecedented and will neither affect continuing implementation of the convention nor prevent implementation of the CSP decisions, including the UK-led June decision.

The UK will continue to work with states around the world to support progress towards universal and effective national implementation of the CWC and to uphold the global ban on chemical weapons, including through the provision of £1.1 million of funding to the OPCW to assist the implementation of the June decision and the OPCW’s work more broadly.

[HCWS1177]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Independent Breast Screening Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): The independent breast screening review was announced on 2 May to look into a serious incident in the breast screening programme in England, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of women aged between 68 and 71 not being invited to their final breast screening. I would like to apologise for the distress and suffering caused by this incident.

The review concluded that the policy on the upper age limit for breast screening had been ambiguous since the outset of the programme in 1988. A new specification, issued in November 2013 by the Department of Health and NHS England (NHSE), attempted to clarify how the upper age limit should be defined. However, the specification inadvertently changed the policy, which resulted in a discrepancy between the specification and the IT systems in use, and was not consistently implemented by the breast screening units. This was the source of the incident, which first became apparent in January 2018. The impact of the change in policy was not fully understood at this time.

While subsequent advice provided to the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), was based on an incomplete understanding of what had happened, we welcome the review’s conclusions that the former Secretary of State was correct, based on the information provided, to inform the House of the breast screening incident. The review makes clear that the number of women affected by this incident is significantly lower than previously estimated. Based on the review’s conclusions, Public Health England’s (PHE) current estimate of the number of women who may have had their lives shortened is zero to 34. We agree with the recommendation that PHE progresses as quickly and as sensitively as possible the clinical review with the NHS of all women who may have suffered harm.

The protection of the public’s health has been, and remains, the paramount consideration when responding to this incident. Although PHE was slow to develop a clear understanding of the incident and its causes, we reiterate the review’s praise of the operational response. We would like to put on the record our tremendous gratitude to PHE and the dedicated NHS staff in breast screening centres across England who worked tirelessly to manage significant additional demand and pool capacity across centres to ensure that additional appointments were made available and offered to all women who wanted one.

We agree that there is an urgent need to clarify how we define the upper age limit for breast screening. We will commission the UK National Screening Committee (UKNSC) to provide advice as soon as possible on the scientific evidence to support a precise definition of age. On the basis of the committee’s advice, we will ensure that a new, fit for purpose specification for our national breast screening service is agreed and is reflected in the programme’s delivery. DHSC will work with NHSE and PHE to ensure that the management of local breast screening units, quality assurance of the service they provide, and the national breast screening programme performance indicator are consistent with the new service specification.

We agree it is vital to ensure clarity in roles and responsibilities within each of the national cancer screening programmes, and in accountability arrangements for how these services are commissioned and delivered. We welcome the report’s reference to the comprehensive review of cancer screening programmes by Professor Sir Mike Richards that was recently announced by NHSE. Terms of reference will be published once we have had an opportunity to fully reflect on the review’s recommendations.

We also need to ensure that our current systems adequately support effective delivery and we acknowledge the review’s criticisms that the current national breast screening system (NBSS) is outdated. We welcome the review’s conclusion that the introduction of breast screening select by PHE in 2016 was a step forward. I can confirm that Government have already committed an initial £1.8 million to design a replacement for NBSS.

We will continue to monitor closely all screening IT systems to ensure they are robust and operating as they should. A series of fail-safes to ensure the monitoring of the use of “call and recall” systems within breast screening offices has already been put in place, together with additional national assurance to ensure that these fail-safes are being used effectively.

The AgeX trial will continue as planned. The trial will provide significant new evidence on screening women under 50 and over 70 that simply is not available now, providing the evidence needed to make decisions about the age range for breast screening.
It is essential that we take all necessary actions to learn from the mistakes made. We will consider the review’s report and its recommendations in detail over the coming weeks and will provide a substantive response in the new year. I would like to record my thanks to the co-chairs of the review for their thorough report.

[HCWS1175]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government are committed to making it easier for lawful residents to demonstrate their right to work in the UK, and to strengthening the support we provide to employers when complying with the provisions in the Immigration Asylum and Nationality Act 2006 to avoid employing illegal workers.

In April this year, the Home Office launched a new online checking service. This service enables UK employers to check the current right to work, in real time, of a person who holds either a biometric residence permit or a biometric residence card, and to see whether they are subject to any restrictions.

The system works on the basis of the individual first viewing their own Home Office right to work record. They may then share this information with an employer if they wish, by providing their employer with a “share code”, which can be used to access the record. This authorisation represents an important safeguard and means employers will only view an individual’s information having received their consent and the share code allowing their access.

We have worked closely with UK employers and with users of the service in developing this new system, which has been operating effectively to provide employers and migrants with additional assurance where used to support right to work checks.

In order for employers to actually rely on the new online service to discharge their legal responsibilities under illegal working legislation, it is necessary to amend the Immigration (Restrictions on Employment) Order 2007 to properly integrate the service into Home Office legislation which stipulates the checks employers should conduct to avoid a penalty for employing an illegal worker. These checks are currently largely predicated on a face value examination of a physical document.

Today we have laid before Parliament the Immigration (Restrictions on Employment) (Code of Practice and Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2018, in accordance with the 2006 Act, together with a revised code of practice, which provides that employers will be able to rely on an online check from the end of January 2019, where a prospective employee has an immigration status that is compatible with the online checking service (holders of biometric residence permits or cards, and those with online immigration status).

From the end of January 2019, employers will be able to request either the online check or the existing document-based check. Online checks will therefore be a voluntary option while migrants and employers develop familiarity with the new service and take up becomes more prevalent.

The online checking service has also been developed to enable EU migrants granted leave to remain under the EU settlement scheme to view their status and to share it with employers and other service providers where appropriate. Current arrangements, under which EU citizens can demonstrate their right to work in the UK by producing their national passport or identity card, will continue after the UK leaves the European Union and for the entire duration of any implementation period. However, with the latest development, EU nationals may alternatively choose to rely on online status issued following a successful application to the EU settlement scheme, by using the online service to share their right to work with their employer. Further detail on the future immigration system will be set out in a White Paper shortly.

The Immigration (Restrictions on Employment) (Code of Practice and Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2018 also seeks to amend the list of documents which demonstrate a right to work, to remove the requirement that a British birth or adoption certificate must be the full certificate for these purposes. The intention is to make it easier for British citizens who do not hold a passport to demonstrate their right to work, using a short birth or adoption certificate with a national insurance number.

In addition to the order, we have also laid the Licensing Act 2003 (Personal and Premises Licences) (Forms) (Amendment) Regulations 2018. The regulations make consequential amendments to prescribed licence application forms to reflect changes to the order.

Successive UK Governments have introduced measures to tackle illegal working which represents the principal pull factor for illegal immigration to the UK, and the 2018 order underscores our commitment to improve the necessary system of checks for employers and workers alike. I would be happy to arrange a demonstration of the new online service for hon. Members.

[HCWS1181]

JUSTICE

Chief Coroner’s Fifth Annual Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): I am pleased to lay and publish the Chief Coroner’s fifth annual report to the Lord Chancellor on the operation of coroner services under section 36 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 (“the 2009 Act”). The report covers the period 1 July 2017 to 30 June 2018.

In particular the Chief Coroner’s report sets out:
- the continuing work to promote consistency in the resourcing of and practices in coroner offices across England and Wales;
- the training and guidance that coroners and their officers have received and the engagement with a wide range of stakeholders;
- recommendations to improve coroner services further.

I am very grateful to His Honour Judge Mark Luocrat QC for building so effectively on his first year’s achievements.

I am grateful, too, to all coroners and their officers and other staff, for having supported the Chief Coroner to improve services for bereaved people and for their valued and continuing frontline work.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office and in the Printed Paper Office.


[HCWS1183]
SCOTLAND

Supreme Court Judgment on the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Today the Supreme Court handed down its judgment on the UK Withdrawal from the European Union (Legal Continuity) (Scotland) Bill. The Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in March of this year. In April the UK Government’s Law Officers referred the legislation to the Supreme Court for a ruling on whether it is within devolved legislative competence.

As I stated when the Bill was referred to the Supreme Court, given the view of the Presiding Officer that the continuity Bill was not within the legal competence of the Scottish Parliament, it was right to seek clarity. The reference was simply in line with the processes provided for in the Scotland Act 1998, which anticipated such situations occurring.

And so I am grateful to the Supreme Court for examining the issues here and for providing greater clarity. This is not simply a question of where constitutional powers lie, important as those questions are. Greater clarity was needed to ensure that our statute book functions properly and that the law is clear for businesses and individuals.

The UK Government thank the Court for its time in considering this case.

The Court’s judgment that significant parts of the Bill are outside the competence of the Scottish Parliament shows that the UK Government was right to refer the Bill to the Supreme Court. We will now carefully review the Court’s judgment.

We want to continue to work with the Scottish Government to provide much needed clarity for businesses and individuals in Scotland. This has been our aim throughout this process.

I have always been clear that it is in the best interests of the people of Scotland for the UK and Scottish Governments to work together as we leave the EU.

This remains my commitment and this will continue following this judgment.

[HCWS1180]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council

The Minister for Employment (Alok Sharma): The Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council met on 6 December 2018 in Brussels. The deputy permanent representative to the European Union, Katrina Williams, represented the UK.

Two legislative proposals achieved general approach at the Council. These were the proposed regulation establishing a European labour agency and a third batch of amendments to the worker protection directive on carcinogens and mutagens.

The Council reached political agreement on a recommendation on access to social protection for workers and self-employed and there were presidency conclusions on gender equality, youth and digitalisation.

The Council also discussed the European semester. As part of this agenda item, the Council approved a contribution to the draft recommendation on the economic policy of the euro area made jointly by the Employment Committee (EMCO) and the Social Protection Committee (SPC); endorsed their joint messages on aspects of digitalisation and robotisation; and endorsed EMCO’s key messages on the latest biennial assessment of member states progress tackling long-term unemployment.

There were a number of progress reports and information items during the Council. These included an update on progress in negotiations regarding a regulation on the European globalisation adjustment fund (EGF); a proposal from 2008 for a directive on equal treatment; and a presentation from the Commission on its 2019 “Autumn Package” of annual growth survey, alert mechanism report, and draft joint employment report.

The Council closed with updates on the status of other legislative files, broader developments in the field of employment and social policy, and an overview of the priorities of the incoming Romanian presidency.

[HCWS1178]
Written Statements

Monday 17 December 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Good Work Plan and Labour Market Enforcement

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Last year Matthew Taylor (Chief Executive of the Royal Society of Arts) published the review of modern working practices, following a commission from the Prime Minister. In February the Government responded to the review, accepting the vast majority of the recommendations. The Government also launched four consultations alongside the response, seeking views on the approach to implementing the review. We received over 400 detailed consultation responses which have been invaluable in informing our policy development.

The industrial strategy set out a long-term plan to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout the UK. Developing better jobs for everyone in the British economy is at the centre of the industrial strategy. Today the Government are publishing the Good Work Plan, setting out a vision for the future of the UK labour market and how the Government will implement the Taylor review recommendations.

As the industrial strategy set out, the world of work is changing rapidly, becoming more flexible and more connected. Never has it been more important for us to ensure the UK labour market is successful, competitive and ready to embrace the changes that come with technological advancements and the emergence of new business models. An essential part of achieving this is striking the right balance between flexibility and ensuring workers have the rights and protections they need. We also need to ensure that good employers in the UK are rewarded for their efforts, rather than being under-cut by a minority of irresponsible employers seeking ways to circumvent the law.

Today, we have also taken the important first step in implementing the Good Work Plan, bringing forward new legislation to provide further rights to workers and ban unfair practices.

I am proud to be the first Secretary of State to take responsibility for quality work and I have written to the Chair of the independent Industrial Strategy Council to ask for their views on the measures Government could use to measure quality of work in the UK. The Good Work Plan commits to a range of policy and legislative changes to ensure that workers can access fair and decent work, that both employers and workers have the clarity they need to understand their employment relationships, and that the enforcement system is fair and fit for purpose. This includes a commitment to legislate to tackle uncertainty around employment status.

Alongside the Good Work Plan today the Government are also publishing their response to the first full strategy from the Director of Labour Market Enforcement.

Sir David Metcalf’s strategy was published on 9 May 2018 and made 37 recommendations on labour market enforcement and raising awareness of employment rights. The Government response accept the majority of the recommendations and sets out the steps the Government will take forward on raising awareness of employment rights, improving intelligence gathering of abuses and strengthening enforcement efforts.

The Home Secretary and I look forward to working with Sir David as the Government seek to implement the recommendations we have accepted and as he prepares to set clear strategic priorities in the 2019-20 Labour Market Enforcement strategy.


[HCWS1184]

CABINET OFFICE

Advance from the Contingencies Fund

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Mr David Lidington): The Cabinet Office has sought a repayable cash advance from the contingencies fund of £137,110,000.

The requirement has arisen because the Cabinet Office receives a relatively high proportion of its voted funding at supplementary estimate, and as a consequence may only draw the related cash from the consolidated fund after the Supply and Appropriation Act has received Royal Assent in March 2019.

The cash advance will pay for programmes which will generate Government-wide benefits or savings and are urgent in the public interest, including advancing EU exit objectives, public inquiries, security, efficient management of Government property and development of IT systems that will benefit the public.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £116,507,000 and capital of £20,603,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Cabinet Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £137,110,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the contingencies fund.

[HCWS1191]

UK Statistics Authority

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): My right hon. Friend Lord Young of Cookham made the following written statement on Friday 14 November:

The twenty-second national census will be conducted in March 2021, across the United Kingdom. The 2021 Census is about collecting information to help build a country that works for everyone, and the results will reflect everyone in our society. To build a stronger, fairer and more caring society and to tackle injustices, we need reliable information on the number and characteristics of people and households to enable a wide range of services and future planning to be supported.
Correspondingly, Government are pleased to present to Parliament a White Paper “Help Shape our Future: The 2021 Census of Population and Housing in England and Wales” [Cm 9745], which sets out the UK Statistics Authority’s detailed proposals for the 2021 census in England and Wales. The Government propose that, subject to Parliamentary approval, the next census of population should be taken on 21 March 2021.

The Government rely on high quality data to make decisions which affect everyone in this country. The census is one of the key data collections where everyone will be able to have their say in 2021 about how they live so that decisions can be made to reflect the society of 2021 and beyond. The Government will use the information to inform policy, to plan public services to meet the needs of today’s society. Census data are also widely used by businesses, local authorities, health authorities, and others to help them plan their services.

The White Paper sets out the strategic aims for the census, explains the need for it, sets out the content and how it will be conducted and deals with matters of public interest such as data security and confidentiality. The White Paper also sets out the UK Statistics Authority’s proposals for the future of population statistics after 2021.

Following previous consultation, the White Paper proposes a new question on Armed Forces veterans which will give support to those who serve their country so well. There will also be new questions on sexual orientation and gender identity to reflect a 21st century society, although nobody will need to tell us their sexual orientation or gender identity if they do not want to. Ministers have decided the right not to respond to these latter two new questions should be made clear in legislation in due course, prior to the census taking place. This mirrors the legal approach taken in 2000 by Parliament when the question on religion was introduced in the 2001 census.

This White Paper sets out the proposals for a census in England and Wales in 2021. The proposed date for the census has been considered collectively across the three census offices in the UK (in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland). The statistical offices of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland are working together to ensure the production of harmonised statistics.

The UK Statistics Authority plans to hold a census rehearsal in October 2019. After consultation with the Welsh Ministers, the Government will lay before Parliament an Order in Council for approval in accordance with the Census Act 1920.

Copies of the White Paper are available from the Vote Office, on www.gov.uk, and have also been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The White Paper is also being presented to the National Assembly for Wales.

[HCWS1188]

EDUCATION

Funding and Support for Schools and High Needs

The Secretary of State for Education (Damian Hinds): Today, I am pleased to announce additional revenue funding in 2018-19 and 2019-20, and extra capital funding in 2019-20, to provide support for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), as well as the 2019-20 dedicated schools grant (DSG) allocations to local authorities.

Our ambition for children with SEND is exactly the same as for every other child—to achieve well in school and college, find employment and go on to live happy and fulfilled lives. High needs funding has already risen by £1 billion, from £5 billion in 2013 to £6 billion this year. As part of our wide-ranging reforms to the SEND system in 2014, we introduced education, health and care (EHC) plans, to ensure that support is tailored to the needs of individuals, and families are put at the heart of the process. Already, more than 320,000 children and young people are benefiting from these.

Members from all sides of the House have raised concerns from schools, colleges and local authorities about the pressures on high needs budgets. I understand that these costs are rising, in particular the costs of special educational provision for those with more complex needs, funded from local authorities’ high needs budgets.

Today I am announcing a number of changes to start to address these pressures.
First, we will provide additional high needs funding allocations across all local authorities, of £125 million in each of 2018-19 and 2019-20. This brings the total allocated for high needs this year to £6.1 billion. This additional investment will help local councils to manage pressures and I have published the individual local authority allocations today.

Ensuring that there is sufficient capacity locally for pupils in mainstream and special schools, and for young people aged 16 and above, is a priority for this Government. As part of this, I am announcing a further £100 million top-up to the special provision capital fund in 2019-20 to take our total investment to £365 million across 2018-21. This additional funding will give more children access to a good school or college place that meets their individual needs. This could also pay for more state-of-the-art facilities, such as sensory rooms and specialist equipment.

We have also received 65 bids from local authorities identifying a need for new special and alternative provision free schools. We now anticipate that all those that fully meet the published criteria will be approved, even if the number of schools exceeds the 30 or so we had originally planned for.

Of course, extra funding cannot be our only response. I want to continue engaging with local authorities, health providers, families, schools and colleges to better understand what is driving the cost pressures on high needs budgets, and to work with the sector to help manage them. Therefore, today I am writing to all local authorities to outline our plans for supporting them in their role of providing strategic leadership and oversight of the provision for children and young people with SEND. While local authorities have this responsibility, I am clear that they cannot act alone in doing so.

To equip all areas to improve planning and commissioning we are establishing a SEND system leadership board focused on improving joint education, health and care commissioning, as recommended by Dame Christine Lenehan’s review into the experiences and outcomes of children in residential special schools and colleges. We are also establishing joint ministerial roundtables with the Department for Health and Social Care to give providers, users and voluntary sector organisations further opportunities to input their views and insight across the SEND system.

To support local authorities in carrying out their statutory EHC plan assessment process and to support schools and colleges in their work with families, I am announcing funding for training more educational psychologists (EPs). We will be funding three more cohorts of EP trainees, starting in September 2020; and will increase the number of trainees from 160 to at least 206, to reflect increased demand. Classroom teachers and those in training will also have a greater focus on supporting children with SEND, as the upcoming teacher recruitment and retention strategy will make sure all teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to meet the needs of all pupils.

My Department is also commissioning SEN Futures: a flagship package of long-term research and analysis to provide evidence on the impact of current SEN provision on children and young people’s outcomes, and to assess the value for money of SEN provision in England. Procurement for the first pieces of work in this programme has begun today.

In addition, in order better to understand the financial incentives that influence how schools, colleges and councils support children and young people with special educational needs, the Department for Education will be gathering more evidence early in 2019. This will include looking at the first £6,000 schools pay for special educational provision before accessing additional funding from local high needs budgets.

I recognise the rising demand for EHC plans for those over 19, and the need for education, health and social care services to agree a shared vision of what good life outcomes look like for an individual, and when it is right to cease an EHC plan. We have commissioned one of our delivery partners, the National Development Team for Inclusion to work with 20 local authorities to develop and model effective practice on this, and to share their findings across regions.

I also want to continue to ensure that services for young people with SEND effectively prepare them for adulthood, including employment: raising expectations and aspirations for young people, their parents, education providers and employers. My officials are working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions on this, and we are committed to finding ways to support more young people with SEND into sustainable employment. I want our wider reforms to post-16 education, including T-Levels, to be accessible to those with SEND and will continue to support close working between colleges, schools and local authorities to improve pathways to adulthood.

Today I am also confirming the school and early years funding allocations for 2019-20. This announcement covers the DSG and the Pupil Premium.

The distribution of the DSG to local authorities is set out in four blocks for each authority: a schools block, a high needs block, an early years block, and the central school services block.

In July 2018, we published the primary and secondary units of funding for the schools block, the provisional allocations for the high needs block and central school services block. These have been updated with the latest pupil numbers to show how much each local authority will receive in 2019-20.

The early years national funding formula rates for 3 and 4-year-olds for 2019-20 were published on 22 November, and today we have announced initial allocations for this block.

The pupil premium per pupil amounts will be protected at the current rates.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to respond to the resolution of the House following the Opposition day debate on school funding on 13 November.

Children only get one chance at a great education, which is why, as today’s announcement further demonstrates, this Government have prioritised and protected school spending—even while having to take difficult public spending decisions in other areas.

Across the board, standards are rising: in 2010, 66% of children were in good or outstanding schools—that is up to 84% now. While there is more money going into our schools than ever before, and we know from international studies that our school spending is in line with or above most comparable countries, we recognise the budgeting challenges schools face and that we are
asking them to do more. That is why we have announced a school resource management strategy, setting out a wide range of practical support to help schools reduce their costs and make every pound count, while at the same time improving outcomes for pupils.

With the funding and support for schools and high needs announced today, I am confident that they will be able to continue to improve outcomes for all children and young people.

[HCWS1185]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): My noble Friend, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon), has made the following written statement:

On Tuesday 4 and Wednesday 5 December, I chaired the UK-Overseas Territories Joint Ministerial Council in London, the 20th such gathering of OT leaders. The Council was attended by elected leaders and representatives from Anguilla, Ascension Island, Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, the Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Montserrat, Pitcairn, St Helena, the Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia, Tristan da Cunha and the Turks and Caicos Islands.

The key themes of discussion at this year’s Council were preparations for the UK’s exit from the European Union; financial services, including beneficial ownership registers; fiscal economic growth, focussing on trade and investment; the constitutional relationship with the UK; the Global Britain agenda; passport issues; safeguarding of vulnerable persons and natural disaster resilience management.

Ministerial colleagues from the Departments for International Development (The right hon. Lord Bates), Exiting the European Union (Robin Walker MP), International Trade (George Hollingbery MP), Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Therese Coffey MP) and Her Majesty’s Treasury (The right hon. Mel Stride MP) attended the discussions, as did the Minister for the Constitution (Chloe Smith MP). I held bilateral meetings with territory leaders. The Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (The right hon. Sir Alan Duncan, KCMG MP) met Members of the Falklands Islands Legislative Assembly.

The Council agreed priorities and set out a number of important commitments and areas for joint work in the year ahead.

We continued our dialogue on the implications for the overseas territories of the UK’s departure from the EU and reiterated our objective to achieve an outcome that works for all parts of the British family. We will seek to ensure the security and economic sustainability of the overseas territories is preserved and strengthened post-Brexit. We discussed how we can better promote the overseas territories as part of the global British family by using the GREAT campaign, bringing the richness and diversity of the territories to our shared international British brand. We reiterated the UK’s commitment to the OTs as a vital part of the British family, and discussed how to ensure the constitutional arrangements work effectively to promote the best interests of each individual territory and of the UK.

We welcomed the progress made by the overseas territories who are committed to implement recommendations made by the Code of Conduct Group, with the outcome that the territories would not be placed on the “tax blacklist”. We acknowledged that there have been huge challenges and have recognised the ongoing issues. We highlighted the importance of continued engagement with the EU Commission and underlined that the delivery of legislation is of paramount importance.

The press statement reflects the commitment of the Governments of the Overseas Territories and the UK to continue to work in partnership to achieve the vision set out in the June 2012 White Paper: The Overseas Territories: Security, Success and Sustainability.

In line with our commitment in the White Paper, we will continue to report to Parliament on progress by Government Departments.

A copy of the press statement has been published on the www.gov.uk website. [HCWS1186]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Council

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The final meeting of EU Interior and Justice Ministers during the Austrian presidency took place on 6 and 7 December in Brussels. I represented the UK for Interior day. The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Gauke), represented the UK on Justice day. Scottish Government Minister for Communities, Ash Denham MSP, also attended.

Interior day began with the Council agreeing a partial general approach on the amendments to European border and coast guard regulation. The presidency concluded that further discussion was needed on the numbers of border guards in the European border and coast guard standing corps, as well as in relation to issues of national sovereignty related to deployments. Member states also expressed concerns over aligning capacity with finances. The Immigration Minister did not intervene as the UK does not participate in this Schengen-building measure.

The Council also discussed the returns directive. Member states expressed significant differences of opinion on detention while a claim was processed and on clarity as to the risk of absconding. The Commission encouraged member states to finalise this file by the end of the legislature. The UK does not participate in this measure.

The Council then discussed the regulation on preventing terrorist use of the internet. Several member states were not able to support the text due to the regulation’s conflict with their own national constitutions and concerns on the balance between the removal of content and fundamental rights. Some member states sought further consideration of the measure. However, the presidency concluded support for a general approach, judging the proposal to be a good and responsible compromise text. The Immigration Minister intervened to support the general approach, emphasising the importance of this legislation in tackling terrorist content online. The presidency stated that it would seek to address various points of concern in future trilogue negotiations.

The Commission urged member states to finalise those proposals of the common European asylum reform package where agreement was in reach. However, in discussion over lunch, member states remained split on the issue of solidarity and burden sharing. The Immigration
The Council adopted conclusions on mutual recognition, mutual trust and the principles underlying mutual recognition instruments such as the European arrest warrant. The Justice Secretary underlined UK commitment to future co-operation with the EU on this basis to enable continued joint working to tackle the challenges of transnational crime.

The Commission updated Ministers on significant progress made in answering points raised by the CJEU on EU accession to ECHR. It was agreed that amendments to the draft accession agreement would be strictly limited to what was required by the Court. The importance of accession was highlighted as a priority for the EU and its citizens and swift resolution encouraged.

[HCWS1189]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Security Situation in Northern Ireland

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Karen Bradley): This is the twelfth written statement to Parliament on the security situation in Northern Ireland since the Independent Monitoring Commission concluded its work in July 2011. It covers the security situation and threat from Northern Ireland related terrorism, rather than from international terrorism, which Members will be aware is the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary, who updates the House separately.

In the 13 months since the last statement on Northern Ireland’s security situation, a small number of violent dissident republican terrorist groups have continued to pursue a campaign of violence. Violent dissident republican terrorists are relatively small, disparate groupings. They remain intent on killing and undermining the will of the vast majority of the people of Northern Ireland who have repeatedly and consistently expressed their desire for peace. These groupings choose to pay no heed to this and continue to plan attacks with the purpose of murdering and maiming those who work on a daily basis to uphold the rule of law and protect the whole community. In attempting to impose their unwanted control on people across Northern Ireland, these groupings also choose to ignore democracy, principles that have been, and will continue to be, central to the political process in Northern Ireland.

In 2016, dissident republican terrorists murdered prison officer Adrian Ismay while in 2017 they again demonstrated their lethal intent, including one attack where a petrol station forecourt was sprayed with gunfire and two police officers were wounded. There have been two attempts to murder police officers since the last written statement, with numerous other plots identified and prevented by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and MI5. These included shots fired at police officers during rioting in Londonderry in July of this year. This incident, like many dissident republican terrorist attacks, posed a risk to members of the public in the immediate area as well as the police officers who were targeted while they were working to keep communities safe.

I wish to pay tribute to all the agencies, including the PSNI, MI5 and the bomb disposal teams, who work on a daily basis to keep people safe. In many cases their work can make them the target of dissident republican terrorists. I applaud the work they do across Northern Ireland, their professionalism and the personal sacrifices
that so many of them make in support of this vital work. I also commend the work undertaken by An Garda Siochana, and the excellent relationship they have with their counterparts in Northern Ireland. This has had a significant impact on dealing with the threat. The commitment of such a wide variety of agencies to public service and to the communities they serve, stands in stark contrast to the acts of dissident republicans.

While terrorist attack planning continues, law enforcement pressure has reduced the number of national security attacks. Since the start of 2018 there has been one national security attack, compared to five in 2017, four in 2016 and a total of 16 attacks in 2015 and 40 in 2010. Although there has been a reduction in the overall number of national security attacks in recent years, vigilance in the face of this continuing threat remains essential and the threat level remains

Since October 2017, MI5 has identified a number of violent dissident republican attack plots; two attacks were attempted, but were ultimately unsuccessful, and others were disrupted. This success is in no small measure due to the continued close working between PSNI and MI5, as well as with the authorities in Ireland. Each of the main violent dissident republican groups has suffered significant disruption including the loss of personnel and weapons in the past 12 months. During the past 12 month period (1 October 2017-30 September 2018) in Northern Ireland, there have been 143 arrests under the Terrorism Act, with 16 people subsequently charged. During the same period, 45 firearms, 0.74kg of explosives and 3157 rounds of ammunition have been seized. This pressure, and other interventions, is a barrier to, and a brake on dissident republican activity of all kinds, although I assess that, in the coming months, dissident republican terrorist groups will continue to seek to attack officers from the PSNI, prison officers and members of the armed forces.

As a consequence of violent dissident republicans' actions and intent, the threat from Northern Ireland Related Terrorism in Northern Ireland remains SEVERE, which means an attack is highly likely. In Great Britain, the threat from Northern Ireland Related Terrorism was reduced in March this year from SUBSTANTIAL to MODERATE, which means an attack is possible, but not likely.

The Government have consistently made it clear that terrorism, including Northern Ireland Related Terrorism, will not succeed and tackling it continues to be of the highest priority. We are determined to keep people safe and secure across the United Kingdom. To support this effort over this Parliament we have provided £160 million of additional security funding to the PSNI to tackle the enduring threat from Northern Ireland Related Terrorism. This is significant funding. They recognise the severity of the terrorist threat; it demonstrates our unwavering commitment to the brave men and women in the police and intelligence agencies, and it is helping to keep people safe.

Paramilitary groups, both republican and loyalist, continue to carry out violent criminal attacks against members of their own communities. So far this year there have been 64 such attacks. This includes one paramilitary-related death, 16 casualties of paramilitary style shootings and 47 casualties of paramilitary style assaults. The hypocrisy of paramilitary-linked criminals claiming to act to defend their communities from anti-social behaviour and drug dealing, while at the same time profiting from this activity is not lost on affected communities. They are targeting the most vulnerable members in their communities as they try to exert control and fear.

This Government continue strongly to support ongoing efforts to tackle paramilitarism and organised crime in Northern Ireland through the delivery of the commitments made in the executive’s action plan on tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime. This work is, by design, a collaborative endeavor being taken forward by a partnership of more than 24 organisations, including executive departments, statutory bodies and voluntary and community sector partners. Delivery is being achieved through four connected and mutually reinforcing approaches, aimed at developing long term prevention measures; building confidence in the justice system; building capacity to support communities in transition; and putting in place the strategies and powers to tackle criminal activity. Supporting the move away from paramilitary activity and promoting a culture of lawfulness are key underpinning are providing £25 million over five years to support a Northern Ireland executive programme of activity. This resource is being matched by the executive, giving a total of £50 million. The Independent Reporting Commission (IRC) is charged with reporting on progress towards ending paramilitary activity, and its first report was published on 23 October 2018.

In the last year significant progress has been made. For example, key initiatives already making a difference include outreach programmes aimed at supporting young people in areas particularly vulnerable to paramilitary activity; a programme delivering mentoring support for young men; and one for women aimed at building their capacity to be involved in community transformation. Work also continues on the speeding up justice programme, and the PSNI is working with communities to implement training and interventions in collaborative problem solving, as well as local initiatives to address issues of visibility and engagement. Young people have also been taking part in a programme on lawfulness being run by the Attorney General for Northern Ireland, and a number of other pilot projects on the theme of promoting a culture of lawfulness are being delivered by a range of partners.

In addition, since the Paramilitary Crime Task Force, which comprises the PSNI, the National Crime Agency (NCA) and Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs (HMRC), became fully operational in 2017, it has carried out a number of high profile operations against organised crime groups linked to paramilitaries. During 2017-18 the Task Force carried out over 110 searches and made over 47 arrests, including 44 people charged or reported to the Public Prosecution Service. In addition, 21 paramilitary-related organised crime groups were frustrated, disrupted or dismantled.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the SEVERE threat from dissident republican terrorists remains and paramilitary activity continues to have an impact in certain communities in Northern Ireland. Considerable progress has been made, but the need for vigilance remains. There are a relatively small number of people who wish to continue to commit acts of terror and who want to control communities
through violence for their own criminal ends. Through the excellent work of PSNI, MI5 and other law enforcement agencies including An Garda Síochána, we will continue to bring to justice those who seek to cause harm in our society. There never has been, and there never will be any place for terrorism or paramilitary activity in Northern Ireland. We all must play our part so that we can continue to allow Northern Ireland to flourish and ensure a stronger Northern Ireland for everyone free from this harmful and malign activity.

[HCWS1187]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Single Financial Guidance Body Launch

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): The Department for Work and Pensions is launching the Single Financial Guidance Body, established under s1 of the Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018 in January 2019. The new body will deliver money guidance, pensions guidance and debt advice to the public. However, the launch date is in advance of the Department for Work and Pensions Supplementary Estimate 2018-19. This will give the confirming authority of the Supply and Appropriation Act to this expenditure. This will not be published until February, and not authorised until mid-March. In order to continue to provide these services to the public, DWP has therefore requested a Contingencies Fund advance.

Parliamentary approval for resources of £35,000,000 for this new service has been sought in the Supplementary Estimate for the Department for Work and Pensions. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £35,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund. This sum is equivalent and no different from existing resources.

Once Royal Assent to the Supply and Appropriation Bill is achieved, the advance will be repaid.

[HCWS1192]
The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Greg Clark): Today, Sir John Kingman has published the final report of the Independent Review of the Financial Reporting Council (FRC) and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has published an interim report on its market study into the audit market.

The independent review of the FRC is a comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness of the regulator for audit and accounting, and the Government will take forward the recommendations set out in the review to replace the FRC with a new independent statutory regulator with stronger powers.

The CMA’s interim report on its study into the statutory audit market makes recommendations to improve competition and increase capacity in the audit market. This is central to improving audit quality and I now look forward to the publication of the final report.

There is also a need to consider the standards expected of audits, including whether auditors are assessing the right information, and utilising the right technologies. This question was first raised by industry itself, who proposed a review to look at the future of audit. However, audit reports are prepared for the benefit of shareholders and investors, and it is critically important that they are involved in shaping the future of audit.

This is why I am today announcing a Government-commissioned independent review to consider how to improve audit effectiveness. I have asked Donald Brydon, chairman of the London Stock Exchange Group and Sage Group, to chair this review.

This new review, building on the work of the FRC and CMA reviews, will now consider audits as a product and what the future, standards and requirements should be for audits in the future. To ensure the UK’s audit sector remains world leading by constantly looking to upgrade standards, the Brydon review into UK audit standards will consider:

- How far audit can and should evolve to meet the needs of investors and other stakeholders, putting the UK at the forefront;
- How auditors verify information they are signing off;
- How to manage any residual gap between what audit can and should deliver; and
- What are the public’s expectations from audit.

The new review will also test the current model and ask whether it can be made more effective as well as looking at how audit should be developed to better serve the public interest in the future, taking account of changing business models and new technology.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Elizabeth Truss): HM Treasury, along with all of HM Government, are committed to ensuring that we make a success of EU-exit. At Autumn Budget 2017, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer committed £3 billion to help Departments and devoted Administrations make necessary preparations for EU-exit in 2018-19 and 2019-20; this was subsequently increased by £0.5 billion in the 2018 Budget, meaning the Government have invested over £4 billion in preparing for EU-exit since 2016. Working with colleagues across Government to deliver on the referendum while protecting jobs, businesses and prosperity and to support Departments in planning for EU-exit, HM Treasury has allocated the following funding to Departments for the financial year 2019-20:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>£m (*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attorney General’s Office</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet Office</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition and Markets Authority</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Culture, Media and Sport</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for International Trade</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Transport</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Health and Social Care</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department for Work and Pensions</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Standards Agency</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign and Commonwealth Office</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HM Revenue &amp; Customs</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HM Treasury</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Office</td>
<td>480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Defence</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministry of Justice</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland Office</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office for National Statistics</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police Service of Northern Ireland</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland Office</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Intelligence Account</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Archives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Supreme Court</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wales Office</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This has generated the following Barnett consequentials for the devolved Administrations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>£m (*)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Northern Ireland Executive</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Government</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welsh Government</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Numbers rounded to the nearest million unless otherwise stated

The Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (George Eustice): Today I am updating the House on the implementation of the Government's strategy to eradicate bovine TB in England by 2038.
Bovine TB remains one of the greatest animal health threats to the UK, causing devastation and distress for hard-working farmers and rural communities. We are therefore continuing to take strong action to eradicate the disease.

Professor Sir Charles Godfray’s independent review of the strategy highlighted a number of potential further actions while noting the level of challenge associated with eradicating bovine TB. We continue to consider the review’s advice in detail and will publish a formal response in due course.

In the meantime, I am today announcing plans to enhance biosecurity on farms and when trading, introducing earned recognition into our testing regime and inviting further applications to our badger vaccination grant scheme. I am also reporting on the outcome of 2018 badger control operations. All of the cull areas satisfied the level of badger removal that was required by their licence conditions.

Our joint industry-Government biosecurity progress report has been published today. As part of our commitment to improving this important element of our wider TB strategy we will be investing £25,000 to improve the TB hub website which is hosted by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board and which provides farmers and others with practical biosecurity advice. Furthermore, early next year we will carry out our first ever TB farm practices survey which will help us to get a better understanding of the extent to which biosecurity and other farming practices currently contribute to our efforts to control bovine TB.

Since January 2018 many herds in the edge area of England have been subject to six-monthly surveillance testing. From May 2019 we will give recognition to herds that have managed to stay clear of bovine TB restrictions in the last six years and herds that have achieved accreditation based on standards laid down by the Cattle Health Certification Standards body. We hope allowing these lower risk herds to revert to annual testing will incentivise others to take steps to reduce their TB risks.

There is broad scientific consensus that badgers are implicated in the spread of TB to cattle. This year, effective, licensed badger removal operations were completed by local farmers and landowners in 11 new areas and 19 existing areas. Alongside our robust cattle movement and testing regime, this will allow us to achieve and maintain long term reductions in the level of TB in cattle across the south-west and midlands, where the disease is widespread. The pace at which farmers and landowners came together to deliver an effective badger removal operation in Cumbria, part of the TB low-risk area, alongside enhanced cattle measures, has given us the best opportunity to stamp out the disease in this hotspot.

Badger BCG vaccination can provide a level of protection against disease and has a role to play in limiting TB spread to healthy badger populations. Therefore, a second round of applications for the “badger edge vaccination scheme” is now open, with grant funding available to private groups wishing to carry out badger vaccination in the edge area of England. Groups will receive at least 50% funding towards their eligible costs. This builds on the three initial four-year projects we have funded, which successfully carried out badger vaccination in 2018.

We remain determined to implement all available measures necessary to eradicate this devastating disease as quickly as possible. [HCWS1195]

Resources and Waste Strategy


In the 25 Year Environment Plan, the Government pledged to leave the environment in a better condition for the next generation. Our ambitious new strategy will help us meet that commitment and sets out how we will eliminate avoidable plastic waste and double resource productivity. We will go further and faster to reduce, reuse and recycle and support the move away from being a ‘throw-away’ society.

Businesses and manufacturers have a key role to play. Our reforms will make certain that both the responsibility for and the cost of recycling or disposal of post-consumer packaging sits fairly and squarely with producers and not taxpayers. The money raised will be used to boost household recycling and make sure that any packaging used is recycled and disposed of properly. This will complement a tax on plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled plastic, announced in the Budget, which will stimulate demand for recycled plastic.

These reforms, and others, will be complemented by improvements to local authority collections systems. Householders want to recycle more, but materials collected for recycling vary from council to council and people are confused. This strategy will tackle this and we will consult shortly on legislating to allow Government to specify a core set of materials to be collected by all local authorities and waste operators at the kerbside, and supporting comprehensive and frequent rubbish and recycling collections.

This strategy sets out robust measures to tackle waste crime and will crackdown on food needlessly going to waste. We will consult on weekly separate food waste collections for every household and mandatory food waste measurement and reporting for businesses, including retailers.

I will place a copy of the new Resources and Waste Strategy in the Libraries of the House. [HCWS1200]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Alleged Serious and Significant Offences (Diplomatic Immunity)

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): In 2017, 12 serious and significant offences allegedly committed by people entitled to diplomatic or international organisation-related immunity in the United Kingdom were drawn to the attention of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office by Parliamentary and Diplomatic Protection of the Metropolitan Police Service, or other law enforcement agencies. Five of these were driving-related. We define serious offences as those which could, in certain circumstances, carry a penalty of 12 months’ imprisonment or more. Also included are drink-driving and driving without insurance.
Around 23,000 people are entitled to diplomatic immunity in the UK and the majority of diplomats and dependants abide by UK law. The number of alleged serious crimes committed by members of the diplomatic community in the UK is proportionately low.

Under the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1961, we expect those entitled to immunity to obey the law. The FCO does not tolerate foreign diplomats breaking the law.

We take all allegations of illegal activity seriously. When the police bring instances of alleged criminal conduct to our attention, we ask the relevant foreign Government to waive diplomatic immunity where appropriate. For the most serious offences, and when a relevant waiver has not been granted, we request the immediate withdrawal of the diplomat.

Listed below are alleged serious and significant offences reported to the FCO by UK law enforcement agencies in 2017.

### 2017

- **Driving without insurance**
  - Finland 1
  - Saudi Arabia 1
- **Driving without insurance (and not in accordance with a licence)**
  - Sierra Leone 1
- **Driving under the influence of alcohol**
  - Austria 1
  - Commonwealth Secretariat 1
- **Possession of a firearm with intent to injure**
  - Cambodia 1
  - Blackmail
  - Egypt 1
- **Sexual assault**
  - Algeria 1
- **Rape (a)**
  - Other (b) 2
- **Attempted rape (a)**
  - Other (b) 1
- **Malicious communication (a)**
  - Other (b) 1

  (a) These are allegations made against the same person, who was subsequently expelled from the UK after a waiver of immunity was requested and rejected by the sending state.

  (b) Details have been withheld because the number of diplomatic personnel in the mission concerned is so small that disclosure could lead to inaccurate speculation that other members of the mission were involved.

We also wish to record a further seven alleged offences.

Three allegations each of conspiracy to cheat the public revenue and of conspiracy to launder the proceeds of crime between 31 December 2009 and 1 January 2013, made against a former Cameroonian diplomat and two locally employed members of staff of the High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon. We did not record these alleged offences in previous written ministerial statements because the cases were under investigation.

One additional count of driving without insurance made against a member of staff of the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia in 2016. This was not reported to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office until later.

Figures for previous years are available in the Secretary for State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs' written statement to the House on 11 October 2017 (HCWS155).

---

### Diplomatic Missions and International Organisations: Debts

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has held meetings with a number of missions about outstanding parking fine debts, outstanding national non-domestic rates payments and unpaid congestion charge debts. The director of protocol raises the issue in his introductory meetings with all new ambassadors and high commissioners whose missions are in debt to the relevant authorities. FCO officials also press diplomatic missions and international organisations to pay outstanding fines and debts. Earlier this year, protocol directorate wrote to diplomatic missions and international organisations concerned giving them the opportunity to either pay their outstanding debts, or appeal against specific fines if they considered that they had been issued incorrectly.

Parking fines: In 2017, 4,737 parking fines incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London were brought to our attention by local councils, Transport for London and the City of London. These totalled £444,618.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has held meetings with missions which have substantial outstanding parking fine debts. In addition, in May this year we wrote to diplomatic missions and international organisations concerned giving them the opportunity either to pay their outstanding fines or appeal against them if they considered that the fines had been issued incorrectly.

Subsequent payments (including amounts waived by the above authorities) totalled £173,443. There remains a total of £271,175 in unpaid fines for 2017.

The table below details those diplomatic missions and international organisations which have outstanding fines from 2017 totalling £1,000 or more, as of 31 July 2018.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diplomatic Mission/International Organisation 2017</th>
<th>Amount of Outstanding Fines (excluding congestion charge)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Federal Republic of Nigeria</td>
<td>£39,225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Zambia</td>
<td>£20,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>£18,535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia</td>
<td>£12,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cote d'Ivoire</td>
<td>£11,145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan</td>
<td>£10,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the United Arab Emirates</td>
<td>£10,825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Sultanate of Oman</td>
<td>£9,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysian High Commission</td>
<td>£8,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Azerbaijan</td>
<td>£8,735</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan</td>
<td>£7,885</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Libya</td>
<td>£7,075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of South Sudan</td>
<td>£6,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of France</td>
<td>£4,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan</td>
<td>£4,485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the State of Qatar</td>
<td>£4,055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Iraq</td>
<td>£3,685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People's Democratic Republic of Algeria</td>
<td>£3,010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR):

The majority of diplomatic missions in the United Kingdom pay the national non-domestic rates (NNDR) due from them. Diplomatic missions and international organisations are obliged to pay only 6% of the total NNDR value of their offices. This represents payment for specific services received such as street cleaning and street lighting.

Representations by protocol directorate of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to missions in 2018 led to the settlement of outstanding debts by a number of missions.

As at 20 September 2018, the total amount of outstanding NNDR payments, due before 31 December 2017, owed by foreign diplomatic missions and international organisations as advised by the Valuation Office Agency is £1,507,576, an increase of 43% over the 2016 figure, as reported in the 2017 WMS (£1,049,999). However, £73,589 of this outstanding debt is owed by Syria—which is not currently represented in the UK and we have therefore been unable to pursue this debt. Three missions are responsible for over a fifth of the remainder. We shall continue to urge those with NNDR debt to pay their dues.

The missions listed below owed over £10,000 in respect of NNDR.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diplomatic Mission/International Organisation 2017</th>
<th>Amount of Outstanding Fines / excluding congestion charge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Liberia</td>
<td>£2,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner for India</td>
<td>£2,835</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Sierra Leone</td>
<td>£2,445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the State of Kuwait</td>
<td>£2,415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the People’s Republic of China</td>
<td>£2,290</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania</td>
<td>£2,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan</td>
<td>£2,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Indonesia</td>
<td>£2,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Romania</td>
<td>£1,785</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>£1,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Angola</td>
<td>£1,750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Thai Embassy</td>
<td>£1,625</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan</td>
<td>£1,510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam</td>
<td>£1,320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria</td>
<td>£1,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Georgia</td>
<td>£1,210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Ukraine</td>
<td>£1,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan</td>
<td>£1,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission of the United Republic of Tanzania</td>
<td>£1,070</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon £32,196
Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia £35,061
Embassy of the Republic of Albania £26,831
High Commission for the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka £26,278
Embassy of Ukraine £23,602
Embassy of the Republic of Cote d’Ivoire £22,602
The Commonwealth Secretariat £18,496
Embassy of the State of Qatar £17,573
Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania £12,143

London Congestion Charge: The value of unpaid congestion charge debt incurred by diplomatic missions and international organisations in London since its introduction in February 2003 until 31 December 2017 as advised by Transport for London (TfL) was £110,069,300. The table below shows those diplomatic missions and international organisations with outstanding fines of £100,000 or more. FCO officials continue to press diplomatic missions to pay congestion charge and any other outstanding debts. The director of protocol raises the issue in his introductory meetings with all new ambassadors and high commissioners whose missions are in debt to TfL. Officials also write to diplomatic missions and international organisations with large congestion charge debts to encourage payment.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of fines</th>
<th>Total outstanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the United States of America</td>
<td>99,150</td>
<td>£11,925,920</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Japan</td>
<td>66,783</td>
<td>£0,821,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Federal Republic of Nigeria</td>
<td>56,085</td>
<td>£6,724,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Russian Federation</td>
<td>48,136</td>
<td>£5,653,955</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner for India</td>
<td>43,940</td>
<td>£5,394,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany</td>
<td>36,770</td>
<td>£4,288,680</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the People’s Republic of China</td>
<td>34,256</td>
<td>£4,337,295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Poland</td>
<td>33,350</td>
<td>£4,065,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner for Ghana</td>
<td>30,080</td>
<td>£3,653,695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Sudan</td>
<td>27,016</td>
<td>£3,160,730</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan</td>
<td>25,281</td>
<td>£3,116,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Kenya</td>
<td>21,729</td>
<td>£2,569,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of France</td>
<td>18,188</td>
<td>£2,172,845</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Islamic Republic of Pakistan</td>
<td>17,010</td>
<td>£2,105,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the United Republic of Tanzania</td>
<td>16,621</td>
<td>£1,945,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Spain</td>
<td>16,112</td>
<td>£1,927,350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Korea</td>
<td>15,527</td>
<td>£1,907,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cuba</td>
<td>13,442</td>
<td>£1,650,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Algeria</td>
<td>13,395</td>
<td>£1,590,040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of South Africa</td>
<td>13,359</td>
<td>£1,555,650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Romania</td>
<td>13,327</td>
<td>£1,581,930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Sierra Leone</td>
<td>12,535</td>
<td>£1,470,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Greece</td>
<td>12,093</td>
<td>£1,428,025</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Ukraine</td>
<td>12,014</td>
<td>£1,412,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Hungary</td>
<td>9,314</td>
<td>£1,118,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Cyprus</td>
<td>8,971</td>
<td>£1,081,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Zambia</td>
<td>7,840</td>
<td>£928,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Yemen</td>
<td>7,700</td>
<td>£919,630</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Bulgaria</td>
<td>6,971</td>
<td>£812,180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Country</td>
<td>Number of fines</td>
<td>Total outstanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Cameroon</td>
<td>6,069</td>
<td>£712,515</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Belarus</td>
<td>5,877</td>
<td>£691,840</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Botswana</td>
<td>5,832</td>
<td>£710,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Malawi</td>
<td>5,803</td>
<td>£694,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Mozambique</td>
<td>5,535</td>
<td>£660,870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Slovak Republic</td>
<td>5,522</td>
<td>£644,985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia</td>
<td>5,429</td>
<td>£634,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of Namibia</td>
<td>5,380</td>
<td>£602,145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Zimbabwe</td>
<td>5,350</td>
<td>£606,395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Kingdom of Swaziland</td>
<td>5,175</td>
<td>£602,440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Cote d’Ivoire</td>
<td>4,979</td>
<td>£594,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Turkey</td>
<td>4,926</td>
<td>£606,645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Malta</td>
<td>4,723</td>
<td>£574,890</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Lithuania</td>
<td>4,617</td>
<td>£556,695</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea</td>
<td>4,493</td>
<td>£527,795</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Austria</td>
<td>4,481</td>
<td>£538,875</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Mauritius</td>
<td>4,434</td>
<td>£521,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Kingdom of Lesotho</td>
<td>4,087</td>
<td>£479,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Liberia</td>
<td>4,045</td>
<td>£492,485</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda High Commission</td>
<td>4,026</td>
<td>£483,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Belgium</td>
<td>3,661</td>
<td>£438,575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Czech Republic</td>
<td>3,602</td>
<td>£418,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Guinea</td>
<td>3,574</td>
<td>£418,780</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam</td>
<td>3,471</td>
<td>£411,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan</td>
<td>3,440</td>
<td>£409,465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Jamaica</td>
<td>3,080</td>
<td>£368,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Royal Danish Embassy</td>
<td>3,049</td>
<td>£365,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Kingdom of Morocco</td>
<td>2,953</td>
<td>£377,535</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Democratic Republic of the Congo</td>
<td>2,839</td>
<td>£355,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of South Sudan</td>
<td>2,729</td>
<td>£351,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka</td>
<td>2,724</td>
<td>£344,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Tunisia</td>
<td>2,613</td>
<td>£322,495</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Arab Republic of Egypt</td>
<td>2,300</td>
<td>£245,220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Portugal</td>
<td>2,297</td>
<td>£282,130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea</td>
<td>2,249</td>
<td>£259,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Latvia</td>
<td>2,247</td>
<td>£271,850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Finland</td>
<td>2,224</td>
<td>£266,550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Iraq</td>
<td>2,206</td>
<td>£280,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Antigua &amp; Barbuda</td>
<td>2,151</td>
<td>£255,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Luxembourg</td>
<td>2,029</td>
<td>£244,770</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Slovenia</td>
<td>2,009</td>
<td>£245,590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>1,826</td>
<td>£200,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Belize</td>
<td>1,779</td>
<td>£220,740</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of Estonia</td>
<td>1,455</td>
<td>£180,115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the State of Eritrea</td>
<td>1,266</td>
<td>£150,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Dominican Republic</td>
<td>1,231</td>
<td>£147,690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Guyana</td>
<td>1,186</td>
<td>£139,635</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the International Maritime Organisation</td>
<td>1,095</td>
<td>£100,510</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for the Republic of the Maldives</td>
<td>1,074</td>
<td>£132,445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Commission for Seychelles</td>
<td>1,052</td>
<td>£128,005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania</td>
<td>1,025</td>
<td>£109,050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of El Salvador</td>
<td>964</td>
<td>£115,330</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embassy of the Republic of Moldova</td>
<td>838</td>
<td>£100,225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figures for previous years are available in the Secretary for State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs’ written statement to the House on 11 October 2017 (HCWS154) which can be found at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2017-10-11/HCWS154/.

[HCWS1204]

**Foreign Affairs Council: 10 December 2018**

The **Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan)**: The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), attended the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) on 10 December. It was chaired by the High Representative and Vice-President of the European Union (EU) for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HRVP), Federica Mogherini. The meeting was held in Brussels.

**Current Affairs**

The HRVP made reference to Human Rights Day which fell on 10 December. We supported the Dutch proposal for an EU global human rights sanctions regime.

**Western Balkans**

Ministers discussed recent developments in the western Balkans. On Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ministers recalled the need for Governments to be formed at all levels and ensure that there was progress on the reform agenda. Ministers underlined the importance of supporting efforts to implement the Prespa agreement between Skopje and Athens and expressed their support for the EU’s strong focus on the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Finally, Ministers noted concerns about the Kosovo Government’s decision to increase the tariffs on goods from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to 100%, in clear violation of the central European free trade agreement.

**EU-African Union co-operation**

Ministers discussed EU-African Union (AU) co-operation ahead of the first inter-summit EU-AU ministerial meeting, which will take place on 21 and 22 January 2019 in Brussels. The meeting will cover three main themes: political aspects (peace, security and governance), economic aspects (investment, trade and skills) and multilateralism (strengthening co-operation in support of a rule-based global order). Ministers expressed their clear interest in reinforcing the EU strategic partnership with Africa. They highlighted the importance of engaging with youth and noted the progress already made on co-operation on peace, security and governance, including through the signing of an EU-AU memorandum of understanding on 23 May 2018. On migration and mobility, they highlighted the work done in the framework of the joint Valletta action plan. Ministers also underlined the crucial role of the private sector and private investment to boost EU-Africa relations. They welcomed the proposed new Africa-Europe alliance on sustainable investments and jobs.
Ukraine

Ministers recalled their deep concern about the dangerous increase of tensions in the Azov sea and Kerch strait and reaffirmed that the EU does not recognise the “elections” of 11 November 2018. The Council were joined by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, focusing on the latest developments in the Azov sea and the security situation in Ukraine, as well as on possible EU support to assist the affected regions in south-east Ukraine.

Iran

During discussions about Iran, Ministers focused on the implementation of the joint comprehensive plan of action, including ongoing EU efforts to preserve effective financial channels to Iran and to pursue legitimate trade relations against the background of the re-imposition of US sanctions on 5 November 2018. Ministers also discussed concerns about recent behaviour by Iranian actors on European soil, Iran’s ballistic missiles programme and other regional security aspects.

Venezuela

The HRVP updated Ministers about ongoing work to consider establishing an international contact group with Venezuela that could, if conditions were met, help facilitate a political process. The Council also confirmed its firm stance on the targeted restrictive measures in place on Venezuela. Ministers reconfirmed that the election on 20 May 2018 had lacked any credibility and agreed to find a common EU approach to the start of elections on 20 May 2018 had lacked any credibility and agreed to find a common EU approach to the start of elections on 20 May 2018 had lacked any credibility and agreed to find a common EU approach to the start of elections.

The Council agreed a number of measures without discussion:

- The Council adopted conclusions on Libya;
- The Council adopted conclusions on the situation in Myanmar/Burma;
- The Council adopted conclusions on an EU strategy on India;
- The Council adopted conclusions on women, peace and security (WPS);
- The Council added nine persons to the list of those subject to restrictive measures over actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine and because of their involvement in the so-called “elections” in the so-called “Donetsk People’s Republic”;
- The Council extended the implementation period of its decision on the provision of satellite imagery in support of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPW) missions in Syria for 12 months;
- The Council adopted a decision to provide the EU’s assistance to the United Nations office on drugs and crime (UNODC) in Vienna and the United Nations office of counter-terrorism (UNOCT) in New York for the sustained promotion of universal adherence to and effective implementation of the international convention for the suppression of acts of nuclear terrorism (ICANT);
- The Council extended the restrictive measures currently in place against the Democratic Republic of the Congo until 12 December 2019;
- The Council decided to repeal the EU restrictive measures against Eritrea following the adoption on 14 November 2018 by the United Nations Security Council of resolution 2444 (2018) terminating, with immediate effect, all UN restrictive measures against Eritrea;

The Council amended its decision and regulation concerning restrictive measures against Somalia, following the adoption of the United Nations Security Council resolution 2444 (2018) of 14 November 2018. It is now possible to designate persons committing acts involving sexual and gender-based violence;

The Council amended its decision and its regulation concerning restrictive measures in respect of the situation in South Sudan, following the update of 21 November 2018 by the UNSC committee on the information relating to one of the persons subject to restrictive measures;

The Council approved the position of the EU, in view of the fifth meeting of the Association Council with Ukraine that will take place in Brussels on 17 December 2018;

The Council adopted the position to be taken on behalf of the EU within the association council set up by the Euro-Mediterranean agreement establishing an association between the EU and Jordan;

The Council adopted a declaration concerning transport costs for land, sea and air deployment of battle groups, which renews for two years the same commitments as in the previous Council declaration. The Council therefore accepts that the Athena mechanism will bear as operational common costs incremental transport costs for land, sea and air deployment of battle groups at short notice to the joint area of operations;

The Council extended the mandate of the EU capacity building mission in Somalia, EUCAF Somalia until 31 December 2020. The Council also agreed on a budget of €66.1 million for the period 1 January 2019 until 31 December 2020;

The Council amended the mandate of the EU military training mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA), to include an interoperability pillar;

The Council established the EU common position for the third meeting of the EU-Kosovo Stabilisation and Association Council;

The Council established the EU common position for the fifth meeting of the EU-Serbia Stabilisation and Association Council;

The Council decided not to oppose the adoption of a Commission regulation amending annex IX to regulation 999/2001 and annex XV to Commission regulation 142/2011 as regards health certification at import into the Union concerning transmissible spongiform encephalopathies;

The Council decided not to oppose a Commission regulation amending annex III to regulation (EC) 110/2008 as regards the registration of the spirit drink “tequila” as a geographical indication.

[HCWS1196]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Committee for the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific Purposes

The Minister for Security and Economic Crime (Mr Ben Wallace): My noble Friend the Minister of State for the Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford) has today made the following written statement:

I am pleased to announce that Professor David Main has been appointed to the Committee for the Protection of Animals Used for Scientific Purposes (commonly referred to as the ASC) as its new Chair. This appointment is for three years, beginning on 1 March 2019. Professor Main is a Professor of Production Animal Health and Welfare at the Royal Agricultural University and a veterinary surgeon.

The ASC is an independent public body sponsored by the Home Office. It provides independent advice about issues relating to the use of animals in scientific procedures within the context of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. Professor Main will replace Dr John Landers, whose term as Chair ends on 28 February 2019.
I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr Landers for his dedication to the role of Chair of the ASC for the past five years.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The Grenfell Tower fire represents the greatest loss of life in a residential fire in a century. The Government have taken considerable action since the fire to make sure people are safe and feel safe in their homes. We have identified unsafe buildings and ensured there are appropriate interim measures in place. We have sought expert advice and made this widely available to building owners and those involved in refurbishing buildings. We have issued advice to building owners on known risks and on how to remediate buildings and incentivised remediation by providing funding to social sector landlords. Where necessary, the Government have intervened into markets for products and taken action to have unsafe products removed from the marketplace. As well as dealing with current issues, we have commissioned a review of the whole regulatory system, received two reports and taken forward the recommendations of the interim report of the independent review of building regulations and fire safety (the review).

However, there remains much to do. The review identified failings in the regulatory system and made recommendations to address them. We have heard from over 200 people in response to the review and have analysed those responses. We have also learnt from the remediation process and from other issues that have been investigated over the last 18 months to formulate our response.

In addressing the challenges laid down by the review, the Government want to make sure the identified failings are addressed:

- We will create a stronger and more effective regulatory and accountability framework for buildings in scope, which will have at its core clear responsibility and accountability for keeping people safe. We will prevent people from flouting the system through tougher oversight and a stronger and more effective sanctions and enforcement regime.
- We will facilitate better understanding of what is required to ensure buildings are safe through clearer standards and guidance, as well as improving the rigour of the product labelling, testing and marketing processes to ensure people working on buildings use safe products.
- We will ensure we put residents at the heart of a new regulatory framework through better engagement between them and those managing their buildings, as well as providing more effective routes for escalation and redress when things go wrong. We will ensure building owners reassure residents by providing them with better information about the protection measures in place in their buildings.
- Working with industry, we will drive changes to its culture to encourage greater responsibility for building safety, by improving the competence of those undertaking building work on high-rise residential buildings to complement the tougher regulatory oversight regime, and encouraging the sharing of good practice.

The implementation plan that I am publishing today commits the Government to a programme of reform over the next few years. While legislation will take time to implement, the Government are already acting. We recognised the strength of feeling on combustible cladding and have laid regulations to give effect to a clear ban on the use of combustible materials on the external walls of new buildings over 18 metres containing flats, as well as new hospitals, residential care premises, dormitories in boarding schools and student accommodation over that height. This also rules out the use of assessments in lieu of tests (also known as desktop studies) for cladding and wall systems of such buildings.

Today, we have also published amended guidance which further restricts the use of assessments in lieu of tests, following consultation earlier this year. This ensures transparency and applies much tighter and more restrictive conditions; requires that any assessments are properly evidenced on the basis of test data; and restricts who can undertake them.

In the summer, we published a clarified version of the building regulations fire safety guidance in “Approved Document B” for consultation, and we received a substantial number of detailed comments on the clarified guidance which the Department is currently analysing. We also committed to undertake a full technical review of “Approved Document B” and today we have launched a call for evidence, which is the first stage, and we will gather expert advice on the full range of fire safety issues within the guidance which need to be reviewed.

A number of landlords and firms have already responded to this call for action by reviewing the state of their buildings, proactively engaging with residents and documenting safety features. The Government have established an early adopters group to take forward some of the review’s recommendations. We welcome the work that industry has done to date and look forward to engaging with those living and working in these areas to design a new system that will provide greater assurance to those living in high-rise residential buildings.

The Government have driven significant progress in remediating buildings in the social sector. At the end of November, remediation had started or completed on 116 of the 160 social sector buildings with unsafe aluminium composite material (ACM) cladding systems. There are plans and commitments in place to remediate the remaining 44 buildings.

In the private sector, there has been strong progress since the summer in putting remediation plans in place. At the end of November, there were plans and commitments in place to remediate 203 of the 272 privately owned buildings with unsafe ACM cladding systems, including buildings where remediation has started or completed.

This progress is the result of action we have taken to put pressure on building owners and developers to make their buildings permanently safe, including the creation of a remediation taskforce, chaired by Ministers.

We are also taking decisive action to deal with the remaining buildings where owners are not fulfilling their responsibility to remediate unsafe ACM cladding. To give local authorities confidence to take enforcement action on such buildings, we laid an addendum to the housing health and safety rating system operating guidance and are providing a Local Government Association hosted joint inspection team. I have written to local authorities, with buildings where the owner refuses to remediate unsafe ACM cladding, to offer them our full support to take enforcement action. This will include
financial support where this is necessary for the local authority to carry out emergency remedial work. Where financial support is provided, local authorities will recover the costs from the building owner.

I have repeatedly made clear that building owners should protect leaseholders from bearing the cost of remediation. There is a growing list of owners and developers who are doing the right thing and agreeing to fund remediation. This includes Barratt Developments, Mace Group, Legal & General, Taylor Wimpey and Peabody. I have urged all other owners and developers to follow their lead. The implementation plan I am publishing today sets out the far-reaching programme of work the Government now intend to take to ensure people who live in residential high-rise buildings are safe and feel safe, now and in the future. That work is broken down into four distinct but co-ordinated areas:

A more effective regulatory and accountability framework: Addressing Dame Judith Hackitt’s finding that the regulatory framework around the construction, maintenance and ongoing use of multi-occupied, high-rise residential buildings was not fit for purpose, the implementation plan outlines how the Government intend to create a stronger and more effective regulatory framework. The framework has, at its core, clear responsibility and accountability for keeping people safe, as well as tougher oversight and stronger, better enforced sanctions to prevent people flouting the system. We will not wait for legislation to start this work—we will be testing and trialling elements of the new system soon and I intend to establish a joint regulators group to develop and pilot new approaches and, in due course, to assist with the transition to a new regulatory framework.

Clearer standards, guidance, and product safety: The review identified problems caused by complex and inconsistent standards and guidance, and highlighted the importance of taking a holistic view of building work. The implementation plan provides an update on our work to support better understanding by those who undertake building work of what is required to ensure that buildings are safe through clearer standards and guidance. The implementation plan also makes clear my intention to consult in the spring on options for a new governance structure for the oversight of building regulations and guidance.

The Government also intend to provide greater oversight to ensure products are safe where they are being marketed as safe to those that provide materials used in construction. The implementation plan sets out my intention to establish, over the next 12 months, a “standards committee” to advise me on new and existing construction product and system standards; bring forward proposals to establish consistent legislative powers which cover construction products; and consider options for national regulatory oversight of construction products to ensure that construction products are manufactured to the standards they should meet.

Putting residents at the heart of the building safety system: a stronger voice for residents is at the heart of the system. I am clear we want a change that lasts—we are determined to learn the lessons from the Grenfell tragedy and bring about a fundamental change in both a regulatory framework and the industry culture that will make people safe—and feel safe—in their homes.

The implementation plan sets out measures to work with industry to drive culture change to increase responsibility for building safety, including by improving competence of those undertaking building work. An industry safety steering group, chaired by Dame Judith Hackitt, has been established to challenge and push the sector to drive forward culture change.

The implementation plan includes our commitment to review industry proposals and take a view on whether they deliver a coherent approach to assessing and providing assurance on competence across the construction sector. We will also continue to consider whether legislation is necessary to give effect to a new system of assured competence.

In addition to this, my Department will continue to build on the achievements of a group of early adopters in industry, which I announced in July. Early adopters working with the Government will commit to signing a new building safety charter on culture change and trial and test the implementation of the recommendations of the review in advance of legislation.

This is a major programme of work, but it is necessary to achieve the systemic overhaul that we are aiming for: requiring all parties to change and putting residents’ safety at the heart of the system. I am clear we want a change that lasts—we are determined to learn the lessons from the Grenfell tragedy and bring about a fundamental change in both a regulatory framework and the industry culture that will make people safe—and feel safe—in their homes.

[HCWS1201]

Grenfell Update

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): The independent Grenfell recovery taskforce continues to provide challenge and advice to the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKCC) in their response to the tragedy. I recently received their third report, which I am today depositing in the Library of the House and publishing in full at gov.uk.

I am pleased to see that the council has made some important progress since the second taskforce report in March 2018, notably:

The council’s leadership is strongly committed to Grenfell recovery:

- Governance changes are beginning to bear fruit;
- Many council officers have a good relationship with the people they serve. This is a testament to their humanity, skills and hard work;
- There are pockets of innovative practice.

However, the taskforce is clear that pace remains an issue and that it was to be expected that RBKCC would have been further forward by this point than it currently is. The taskforce has recommended that the council needs to:
Complete the recovery strategy as soon as possible, so that they have a clear road map to achieving recovery.
Ensure they have the capacity and capability to deliver the recovery strategy, whilst at the same time responding appropriately to the public inquiry and associated media interest:
Carry on with their work to repair and improve relationships with their communities, and get the basics right in how they communicate with them:
Remain focused on their programme of culture change to show that they have learnt the lessons from the Grenfell Tower tragedy:
Prioritise the rehousing effort in order that all those made homeless by the tragedy are resettled in good quality permanent homes as soon as possible.

I have asked the taskforce to continue their work in supporting and challenging the council and providing assurance to me; and to report to me again in spring 2019.

[HCWS1202]

Rough Sleeping

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (James Brokenshire): In August, we published a cross-Government Rough Sleeping Strategy, setting out how we will halve rough sleeping by 2022 and end it altogether by 2027. The strategy has three core pillars of prevention, intervention, and recovery, with a preventive approach towards rough sleeping at its heart.

Today, the Government are announcing the locations of 11 Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs, warm and dry centres where people at crisis point will be able to seek shelter, while their housing and support needs are quickly assessed by specialist staff. This follows an expression of interest round which closed at the end of October, and includes the most innovative proposals, from local authorities who can mobilise and deliver services from this winter.

A full list of the early adopter areas can be found here: www.gov.uk/government/publications/rapid-rehousing-pathway-somewhere-safe-to-stay-early-adopters. Somewhere Safe to Stay hubs, allowing for a quick and effective assessment of needs, are central to these local authorities’ “Rapid Rehousing Pathways”. In the 11 early adopter areas, we will be providing funding for a range of policies alongside the hubs—including specialist “Navigators”, supported lettings, and local lettings agencies—to ensure that there is a full and functioning pathway in place to help people into sustained accommodation and appropriate wrap-around support.

These hubs will not only take people off the streets into a safe environment but, crucially, will also take in individuals who have been identified as being at risk of sleeping rough, stopping them having to sleep on the streets in the first place. In this way, the “Somewhere Safe to Stay” model builds upon the success of the “No Second Night Out” model of rapid assessment hubs.

This approach fits with the Government’s objective to intervene sooner, and move towards a preventive approach towards rough sleeping.

The full programme of funding will enable local areas to connect people with the right support, and sustainable housing. It encompasses funding for specialist Navigators, who act as a single point of contact to support people from the streets into settled accommodation; the establishment of local lettings agencies to source, identify, or provide homes and advice for rough sleepers or those at risk; and funding for a supported lettings programme, which will provide flexible support to help individuals sustain their tenancies.

The announcement of the “Somewhere Safe to Stay” early adopters represents key progress against the delivery of the rough sleeping strategy, as set out in the “Rough Sleeping Strategy Delivery Plan” on 10 December. These pilots will be the first step in testing innovative structural change to local systems and the move towards a rapid rehousing approach, bringing us a step closer to the 2027 vision of putting an end to rough sleeping.

The Government will invite a wider bidding round in 2019, for other local authorities to improve and implement their “Rapid Rehousing Pathway”, and will announce the details of this in due course.

[HCWS1203]

JUSTICE

Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Edward Argar): Today I am pleased to publish the terms of reference for the review of the criminal injuries compensation scheme.

Compensation has long been an important part of the Government’s response to supporting victims of violent crime, and the criminal injuries compensation scheme provides payments to those who have suffered serious physical or mental injury as the direct result of violent crime. Our scheme remains one of the most generous in Europe—something of which we can be rightly proud. While no amount of money can ever repair the harm done to an individual through violent crime, we know that compensation offers an important public acknowledgment for victims of the harm they have suffered. Compensation, alongside victims’ services and other practical and emotional support, helps victims of violent crime to start to rebuild their lives.

In 2017-18, the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority made decisions on over 40,000 applications, and paid out £154 million in compensation awards. It is essential that the scheme continues to offer access to compensation for victims injured through violent crime, and in considering whether the current scheme remains fit for purpose, we will be driven by the following principles:

Compensation should be protected for those most seriously affected by their injuries, including in cases where injuries are not immediately evident or their impacts easily quantifiable.
Compensation offers a public acknowledgment of harm suffered by victims of violent crime.
Compensation is an important part of Government provision of end-to-end support for victims of violent crime, which also includes emotional and practical assistance for victims.
The scheme offers support for victims of violent crime who have been unable to seek compensation by other means.
The scheme complies with domestic and international legal obligations to provide compensation for victims of violent crime.

The review will examine, specifically, the scope of the scheme, the eligibility rules, requirements in relation to decision making, and the value and composition of awards. This will include looking at the balance the scheme strikes between serious and less serious physical and mental injury, and the impact of the scheme’s rules on particular groups of individuals, including victims.
of child sexual abuse and victims of terrorism. We will also take this opportunity to consider whether the scheme can be further simplified to provide easier access to compensation for eligible victims. We will also consider issues of affordability and financial sustainability.

A copy of the terms of reference for the review will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will be available online at www.gov.uk. We intend to publish a full consultation on the reform proposals in 2019.

[HCWS1198]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pensions and Long-Term Savings Trials (Self-Employed)

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Guy Opperman): Automatic enrolment has transformed pension saving among today’s workers. Almost 10 million workers have been automatically enrolled into a workplace pension by their employer, and only 9% of those enrolled chose to opt out. And, this success is continuing with automatic enrolment continuing to be delivered and implemented successfully by employers, and increasing individual pension participation and savings levels as highlighted in the 2018 Automatic Enrolment Evaluation Report published today.

As part of the 2017 review of automatic enrolment the Government committed to scope, develop and test targeted interventions aimed at establishing what works to increase retirement saving among the self-employed.

I am pleased to announce that following the Government’s Good Work Plan published yesterday the Government are publishing the “Enabling retirement savings for the self-employed: pensions and long term savings trials” report. This report sets out our delivery plan for delivering research and trialling activity as a step towards implementing the Government’s manifesto commitment to increase retirement saving by the self-employed. This will provide an evidence base for future policy development, using insights from the success of automatic enrolment.

Our plan focuses on testing behaviourally inspired messages and tech tools, which may prompt self-employed individuals to save through a range of approaches in relation to both joining a pension scheme, and facilitating and making regular saving into pensions or other savings vehicles. The preparatory work has already started and trialling activity will go forward into 2019.

It will focus on three areas: marketing interventions aimed at people who are saving or have previously saved to encourage them to continue or recommence their saving behaviour; marketing interventions using trusted third parties to promote the value of saving and provide an easy connection to an appropriate savings vehicle; and behavioural prompts, such as messages delivered through payment mechanisms and/or banking interfaces, to seek to engage self-employed people to think about starting a regular saving habit.

The Department for Work and Pensions will be working with a range of delivery organisations and service providers for the self-employed to commence a programme of research and trialling activity, following preparatory work already done. The report published today is also a call to action to organisations in sectors including payment services; accounting services; self-employed workspaces and growing fintech firms, to work with Government to co-design and test interventions.

The report complements our agenda to empower and improve the consumer experience, in particular through the pensions dashboard and the Single Financial Guidance Body.

The Government’s long-term ambition is for future generations to have confidence in retirement saving—no matter what type of employment or self-employment they experience during their working lives—so that they can prepare for greater security in later life.

I will place a copy of the report in the House Library. These papers will be available later today on: www.parliament.uk/writtenstatements website.

[HCWS1194]
Written Statements

Wednesday 19 December 2018

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Higher Activity Radioactive Waste

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Richard Harrington): As a pioneer of nuclear technology, the UK has accumulated a legacy of higher activity radioactive waste. The UK’s radioactive waste inventory is currently stored securely at various sites. However, each of these sites requires constant maintenance and protection to keep it safe and secure. Geodisposal is internationally recognised as the safest way to dispose permanently of higher activity radioactive waste.

Today I am publishing the policy paper, “Implementing Geological Disposal: Working with Communities: An updated framework for the long-term management of higher activity radioactive waste”. This document sets out the Government’s overarching policy framework for managing higher activity radioactive waste through implementing geological disposal and how we will work with communities to find a location for a geological disposal facility. Alongside publishing this policy paper, the Government are also today launching a new national consent-based process to find a site to host a geological disposal facility (GDF).

A GDF will be a highly engineered structure at a depth of between 200-1,000 metres, which will be used to isolate radioactive waste behind several barriers to ensure that no harmful amount of radioactivity ever reaches the surface environment. The structure will feature vaults and tunnels built inside a suitable, stable rock, within which packaged solid waste in purpose-built containers will be emplaced and then backfilled and sealed.

The GDF will be a multi-billion-pound infrastructure investment and will provide skilled jobs and benefits to the community that hosts it for more than 100 years. Delivering a GDF to dispose permanently of the UK radioactive waste inventory is a responsible public service to future generations and will contribute to the Government’s industrial strategy, which identified the key role the nuclear sector has in increasing productivity and driving clean growth.

There is no preferred location for a GDF and we are adopting a consent-based process to identify a suitable area to host the facility. A suitable site will be determined jointly by the willingness of a community to host a GDF and the suitability of the geology in the area. The process to find a location for the GDF will be led by RWM (Radioactive Waste Management Ltd, a subsidiary of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority), who will work in partnership with local authorities and other community representatives to find a suitable location. Local authorities will have a key role in the decision-making process and will be required to test public support in the local area for a GDF being located there before construction can proceed.

The policy paper we are publishing today applies to England only. Although the “Working with Communities” consultation was published jointly by the UK Government and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland, as the Northern Ireland Executive is currently suspended, a decision cannot be made at this time on further involvement by Northern Ireland in the geological disposal programme. Future policy decisions in relation to geological disposal in Northern Ireland would be a matter for the Executive.

The Welsh Government consulted in parallel with the UK Government on a similar process for engaging with communities and is separately publishing a summary of the issues raised, and their response to the consultation. Scotland has a different policy for the long-term management of higher activity radioactive waste and is not participating in the geological disposal programme.

Alongside the policy paper, I am also publishing separately a summary of the responses to the working with communities policy consultation that took place between 25 January and 18 April 2018 and the Government’s response to the key issues raised. The responses to the consultation demonstrated broad support for the approach to engaging with communities. We have accepted the feedback we received on the benefit of providing additional detail and clarity on parts of the process for working with communities, particularly in relation to the role of principal local authorities.

Alongside this, RWM is publishing a suite of documents that include detailed guidance on how they will work with communities and regional reports from its national geological screening exercise, which will provide communities with information about the geology across the country. RWM is also publishing a draft site evaluation framework document for consultation, which describes the factors that it will take into account in evaluating prospective sites for a GDF.

The response to the consultation on the draft national policy statement (NPS) for geological disposal infrastructure and the BEIS Select Committee report on the NPS will be published separately in due course, alongside a revised proposal for the NPS. Overall, the draft NPS is fit for purpose and contains the adequate levels of guidance and details needed by the developer.

[HCWS1217]

Energy Council

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): The Energy Council will take place on 19 December 2018 where the deputy permanent representative to the European Union will represent the UK.

The presidency will provide an oral report on those elements of the EU clean energy package which have already been agreed: the regulation on governance of the energy union; the directive on energy efficiency; and the directive on renewable energy. It will also provide an oral report on the status of play on those elements of the clean energy package which have yet to be agreed: the regulation on the internal market for electricity; the directive on common rules for the internal market in
electricity; the regulation on risk-preparedness in the electricity sector; and the regulation on the Agency for the Co-operation of Energy Regulators. An oral report will also be provided by the presidency on the state of play on the regulation on the Connecting Europe Facility.

The European Commission will give a presentation on the strategy for long-term EU greenhouse gas emissions reduction in accordance with the Paris agreement. This will be followed by an exchange of views.

Information will be provided by the presidency on the revision of the gas directive and by the presidency and Commission on the follow-up to the hydrogen initiative which was launched at the informal meeting of energy ministers in September 2018. The European Commission will provide information on European leadership in renewables in relation to marine energy and recent developments in the field of external energy relations. Information will be provided by the Italian delegation on the 2019 election of the next international renewable energy agency (IRENA) general director. The Romanian delegation will provide information on the work programme of the incoming Romanian presidency.

[HCWS1206]

CABINET OFFICE

Government Transparency and Accountability

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): Since 2010, the Government have been at the forefront of opening up data to allow Parliament, the public and the media to hold public bodies to account. Such online transparency is crucial to delivering value for money, cutting waste and inefficiency, and to ensuring every pound of taxpayers’ money is spent in the best possible way.

In December 2017, the Prime Minister wrote to Cabinet colleagues setting out her priorities to progress the Government’s transparency agenda. In support of this agenda, the Cabinet Office has created a central transparency data team to oversee transparency leads and publishers across central Government Departments.

Progress has been made by central Government Departments in publishing core transparency data. The Government also continue to look at how the range of information published by Government can be improved and made as useful as possible to the public, press and Parliament.

The following subject areas include documents and data that the Government are due to publish, or which have recently been made available.

Diversity in public appointments

In the public appointments diversity action plan published in December 2017, we published diversity data on current public appointees for the first time and committed to updating this annually. Figures for 2018 were published on 3 December 2018 on gov.uk alongside the report from the Lord Holmes review about opening up public appointments to disabled people.

Ministerial transparency

Alongside the routine quarterly ministerial data on external meetings, gifts, hospitality and overseas travel, the Government are publishing today an updated list of ministerial responsibilities.

The Government are publishing an annual update to the salaries of Ministers, which confirms the entitled and claimed salaries for ministerial posts, and reflects the ministerial pay freeze since 2010.

The Government are also making available the agenda and the meeting notes of July’s co-ordination committee meeting between the Government and the DUP.

Transparency of senior officials and special advisers

Special advisers are a critical part of the team supporting Ministers. They add a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers while reinforcing the impartiality of the permanent civil service by distinguishing the source of political advice and support. The Government are currently reviewing how special advisers’ terms can be made clearer and more consistent, such as by adopting a guide on parental leave rights. The Cabinet Office will today be publishing the annual list of special advisers and their costs.

Departments are also publishing routine quarterly data on gifts and hospitality received by special advisers, as well as information on special adviser meetings with senior media figures.

Alongside quarterly data on the travel, expenses and meetings of senior officials and on business appointment rules advice, the Government are also publishing the annual list of salary details for senior public officials in Departments and arm’s length bodies earning £150,000 and above, reflecting the enhanced scrutiny we have put in place for these most senior posts.

Transparency in the civil service

The Government will be publishing new annual figures on gender pay differentials across the civil service. The overall civil service gender pay gap continues to narrow and we will continue to work hard to balance out wages at all levels of government.

The Government will be publishing the civil service people survey results. The people survey is an annual survey of our employees’ attitudes and experiences of working in the civil service. The survey ran across 102 civil service organisations in October. A total of 302,170 people participated in the survey, an overall response rate of 66.4%.

The Government will also be publishing the 2018 fraud landscape annual report, which is part of their continuing commitment to be transparent in the way that they fight fraud in the public sector. The report highlights the progress the Government are making as part of their strategy to find more fraud in central Government, by initiatives such as raising standards and building counter-fraud capability.

The Government will also be publishing the annual state of the estate report, which gives an overview of progress made on improving the efficiency and sustainability of the Government estate during 2017-18.

Copies of the associated documents will be published on gov.uk and will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1216]
Government Estate

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Oliver Dowden): I have today laid before Parliament, pursuant to section 86 of the Climate Change Act 2008, “State of the Estate in 2017-18”. This report describes the efficiency and sustainability of the Government’s civil estate and records the progress that the Government have made since the previous year. In 2017-18 the central estate reduced in size by 2% and is now 7.7 million square metres and central estate operating costs reduced by £22 million, in real terms. At the same time, vacant space across the Government estate is just 1.4%, compared to 7.1% in the private sector. The estate continued to contribute to sustainability targets set by the Government, showing a 39% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, a 55% reduction in paper use and a 40% reduction in waste since 2009-10. The report is published on an annual basis.

[HCWS1211]

DEFENCE

Reserve Forces and Cadets Associations Scrutiny Team

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): I have today placed in the Library of the House a copy of a letter that I have sent to Major General Simon Lalor, the chairman of the reserve forces and cadets associations external scrutiny team, to respond to the recommendations contained in the team’s 2018 report. I am most grateful to the team for their work.

[HCWS1210]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

25 Year Environment Plan

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Michael Gove):

Draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill

This Government have made a commitment to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited it. This landmark environment Bill—the first in over 20 years—will be an essential step towards this goal. We will support increased biodiversity and thriving plants and wildlife. We will continue to clean up our air and our water, creating a healthier environment. We will cut down unnecessary resource use and waste, reducing our impact on the world and shaping a more efficient, sustainable and competitive economy.

The draft Environment (Principles and Governance) Bill is one key aspect of this ambitious broader environment Bill that will be introduced early in the second parliamentary Session. These draft clauses will put environmental ambition and accountability at the heart of Government. It will create a framework for environmental governance, demonstrating this Government’s strong commitment to maintain environmental protection as we leave the EU. The draft Bill applies to England and to reserved matters UK-wide.

First, these draft clauses include a set of environmental principles to guide future policy making. It also requires the Government to publish a policy statement which sets out how Ministers should interpret and apply these environmental principles. Ministers will need to have regard to this statement when developing their policies. Through this approach, we will firmly embed practical and proportionate environmental considerations in policy making.

Secondly, these draft clauses commit Government to have a plan for improving the environment and to regularly review progress on this plan, publishing a set of indicators. This creates a strong, long-term, economy-wide incentive for action on our landmark 25-year environment plan, which sets crucial changes in motion to improve the environment within a generation.

Thirdly, the draft Bill creates a new, statutory and independent environment body: the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP). This new domestic body will support and uphold standards as we leave the EU. The OEP will be able to scrutinise and advise on environmental legislation and the current 25-year environment plan; investigate complaints; and take enforcement action, including through legal proceedings if needed. Establishing the OEP will ensure that this and every future Government benefit from the expertise vested in a consistent, long-term, independent body on the environment.

In developing these draft clauses, we have drawn on the views and expertise of as many stakeholders and members of the public as possible. We held a 12-week consultation on “Environmental Principles and Governance after EU Exit” from May to August 2018. The monumental 176,746 responses we received are proof of the strength of public interest in this new legislation.

We welcome the forthcoming parliamentary pre-legislative scrutiny to ensure that these draft clauses makes the best possible contribution to protecting our environment as we leave the EU. By creating a new, independent body to hold the Government to account on environmental law, incorporating environmental principles in law, and committing the Government to making and reviewing plans to improve the environment, we are taking unprecedented steps forward to help secure a cleaner, greener future.

Water conservation report: action taken and planned by Government to encourage the conservation of water

Today I am also laying before Parliament the water conservation report. This report provides an account of the work done by the Government to encourage the conservation of water since the publication of the previous report in 2014. The report will also set out the Government’s current plans for water conservation and policy options for demand management in the future.

The report sets out the importance of demand management, including leakage, in securing resilient water supplies to respond to future challenges including climate change, population growth and the need to protect the environment better. These changes are needed alongside new water resources infrastructure, including reservoirs and water transfers, to provide a plentiful supply of water for future generations.
The report commits the Government to launch a call for evidence on setting an ambitious target for personal water consumption. Alongside this, we will hold a consultation to examine the policy options required to support the target. This will include exploratory questions around the labelling of water-using products, improving building standards, the future role of metering, and behaviour change including improving information for consumers.

The report also endorses the water companies’ commitment to reducing leakage by 50% by 2050.

[HCWS1219]

**Environment Council**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):
The next EU Environment Council will take place on 20 December, in Brussels. I will be attending to represent the UK. The Scottish Minister for Rural Affairs and Natural Environment (Mairi Gougeon MSP) will also attend.

On environment items, the main legislative focus will be on the partial general approach on the regulation on LIFE (the EU’s financial instrument supporting environmental, nature conservation and climate action projects throughout the EU).

The primary focus for climate items will be a general approach on the regulation on CO₂ standards for heavy-duty vehicles, followed by an exchange of views on the Commission’s long-term strategy for EU greenhouse gas emissions reduction.

Any other business (AOB) will include information from the presidency on the following legislative proposals:

- regulation on taxonomy;
- directive on single use plastics;
- regulation on persistent organic pollutants (POPs) (recast);
- regulation on the alignment of environmental reporting obligations;
- directive on drinking water (recast);
- regulation on CO₂ standards for cars and vans.

The Commission and presidency will then report on the following two recent international meetings:

- convention on biological diversity (CBD) (Sharm EL-Sheikh, Egypt, 17 to 29 November 2018)—including an update from the UK on the outcomes of the London conference on the illegal wildlife trade held on 11 and 12 October;
- COP 24 United Nations framework convention on climate change (Katowice, Poland 2 to 14 December).

The Commission will then provide information on the implementation of the EU strategy on adaptation to climate change.

Following this, there will be an update from the presidency on the outcome of two discussions held at the informal meeting of Environment and Transport Ministers (Graz, 29 and 30 October 2018):

- the future of European environment policy—towards an eighth environment action programme;
- Graz declaration—“Starting a new era: clean, safe and affordable mobility for Europe”.

There are currently three member state led AOBs:

- adoption of measures at EU level to create the conditions for discontinuing the use of environmentally problematic substances contained in plant protection products (tabled by Belgium);
- intermediary sessions of the meeting of the parties to the convention on environmental impact assessment in a transboundary context (Espoo convention), and the protocol on strategic environmental assessment (SEA) (Geneva, 5 to 7 February 2019) (tabled by Lithuania);
- the environmental and climate ambition of the future common agricultural policy (tabled by Germany, supported by Luxembourg).

Finally, the Romanian delegation will provide information on its upcoming presidency.

[HCWS1207]

**FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**

**OSCE Ministerial Council**

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): Foreign and Commonwealth Office Director-General Philip Barton represented the United Kingdom at the 25th Ministerial Council meeting of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The Council was held in Milan on 6 and 7 December and hosted by Italian Foreign Minister and OSCE chairman-in-office Enzo Moavero Milanesi. The Council is the key decision-making body of the OSCE and was attended by Ministers and senior officials from across its 57 participating states. A number of new commitments were agreed at the Council, including on safety of journalists, combating violence against women, combating human trafficking (with a focus on unaccompanied children) and on control of small arms and light weapons and stockpiles of conventional ammunition. Strong focus at the Council was also maintained on the crisis in and around Ukraine.

Philip Barton’s intervention at the Ministerial Council highlighted threats to sovereignty, threats of confrontation and threats to democracy and fundamental freedoms. He reaffirmed the United Kingdom’s support for Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United Kingdom continues to condemn Russia’s destabilising actions in eastern Ukraine and their illegal annexation of Crimea. I have stated this position clearly at previous OSCE Councils, and recent events in the sea of Azov meant it was important to strengthen this message and call on Russia to release the 24 detained crew members immediately and unconditionally. The EU, US and Canada reiterated this request, with Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland directly challenging Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Russia’s violations of international law.

The UK co-sponsored a side event hosted by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin on the militarisation in Crimea and the sea of Azov. Barton discussed with other officials how best to promote peace and stability in Ukraine and met FM Klimkin to highlight the UK’s support for Ukraine. The UK is the second largest contributor of secondees to the OSCE special monitoring mission to Ukraine, with 68 UK citizens currently seconded, which plays a crucial role in monitoring the security situation. Following an international recruitment competition a UK secondee joined the mission this autumn as deputy-chief monitor.
The UK national statement also highlighted the need to work through the OSCE to resolve protracted conflicts. In Milan, Barton and other “Friends of Georgia” met Georgian Foreign Minister David Zalkaliani to express support for Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Philip Barton also expressed strong support for the OSCE “Human Dimension”, underlying the importance of implementation of OSCE commitments on protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms for security and stability across the OSCE region.

In the Human Dimension there was significant progress at the Council on media freedom, with a consensus decision of all 57 countries addressing the role of the OSCE with respect to safety of journalists. The decision reaffirms the importance of free media and of protecting the safety of journalists, recognises the increased and evolving risks to which journalists are exposed and calls on all OSCE states to condemn unequivocally attacks and violence against journalists and take effective measures to end impunity for such crimes. This is the first new OSCE human rights commitment since 2014 and negotiations were led by the UK ambassador as chair of the OSCE Human Dimension Committee. OSCE representative on freedom of the media Harlem Desir welcomed the decision as a strong signal of support to journalists exposed to difficult conditions in the OSCE region and praised the UK role in helping to deliver it. The result is both timely and in line with the Foreign Secretary’s decision to raise the profile of media freedom as a UK policy priority.

In the OSCE’s political-military dimension, the UK, along with NATO allies, repeated calls for modernisation of the Vienna document, an instrument increasing transparency of military activities. Barton underscored the value of the structured dialogue as a confidence building process aimed at reducing risk and rebuilding trust. He regretted the Ministerial Council’s failure to agree a decision on risk reduction.

The OSCE is an important regional organisation charged with enhancing security and co-operation from Vancouver to Vladivostok, with a network of field operations in western Balkans, central Asia and the Caucasus. An important element in the international, rules-based order, the OSCE’s substantial body of commitments extends across its comprehensive security remit. The UK welcomes the progress made in Milan to reaffirm the role played by the OSCE in this regard.

In Iraq, we are proud to have played a leading role in supporting Iraqi security forces to liberate their country a year ago. A new Government of Iraq have now been formed following the elections in May. I congratulate President Saleh and Prime Minister Abdul Mehdi. We look forward to working with them and their Government.

In Syria, the conflict has entered its eighth year. Our ongoing counter-Daesh efforts there, while successful, are part of a wider context of a brutal civil war. We are playing our part in alleviating humanitarian suffering across Syria. We also continue to push for a negotiated settlement that ends the conflict and protects all Syrians. To that end, we remain committed to supporting the UN-led Geneva process.

As I have previously made clear to the House, the Government are prepared for Daesh to evolve and change its form as it loses territory. Over the past year, we have seen that beginning to take place. Daesh is no longer operating in the open. It is beginning to transition to a clandestine network.

Much remains to be done in the global campaign against Daesh and we must not lose sight of the threat from Daesh. This Government will continue to do what is necessary to protect the British people and our allies and partners. I will provide an oral update on our counter-Daesh efforts in the new year.

Women, Peace and Security National Action Plan

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): I wish to inform the House that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, together with the Department for International Development and the Ministry of Defence, are today publishing the 2018 annual report on progress against the UK’s fourth national action plan on women, peace and security.

Published on 18 January 2018, the national action plan sets out the Government’s objectives on the women, peace and security agenda for the period 2018-22. This is the UK Government strategy for how we will meet our women, peace and security commitments under UN Security Council resolution 1325 to reduce the impact of conflict on women and girls and to promote their inclusion in conflict resolution and in building peace and security.

The report published today outlines our progress against the national action plan over the last 12 months, including our work in our nine focus countries of Afghanistan, Burma, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, South Sudan, Somalia and Syria. It is centred around seven strategic outcomes where we expect to see progress over the five year duration of the NAP.

Electronic copies of the annual report have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and it is available on gov.uk.

Attachments can be viewed online at: https://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2018-12-19/HCWS1208/.

Daesh

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Jeremy Hunt): The global coalition against Daesh has continued to make significant progress in recent months. Since counter-Daesh military operations began, the coalition and its partners in Syria and Iraq have recaptured the vast majority of Daesh territory.

Daesh now remain in control only of a small pocket of territory in eastern Syria. Progress has been made towards forcing Daesh out of Hajin town; the RAF and coalition forces are helping to consolidate contested areas and push out towards outlying Daesh positions.

[HCWS1209]

[HCWS1215]

[HCWS1208]
HOME DEPARTMENT

College of Policing

The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd): The 2017-18 annual report and accounts for the College of Policing (HC 1767) is being laid before the House today and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1212]

Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Sajid Javid): On 25 April 2018 the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse published its interim report [HC 954]. I am pleased to announce that the Government are today publishing their response [Cm 9756].

Tackling the horrors of child sexual abuse is a priority for this Government. I warmly welcome the work of the inquiry in helping us to understand what has gone wrong in the past and learn lessons for the future. The interim report is a significant step in that process. We have responded to all the recommendations directed at Government. These cover: the child migration programme; the civil and criminal justice systems; the health sector; our international obligations; the police; children’s homes; disclosure and barring; and support for victims and survivors.

I am particularly pleased to announce that the Government will establish a scheme to ensure that former child migrants receive a payment as soon as possible in recognition of the fundamentally flawed nature of the historic child migration policy.

I would like to pay tribute to all the victims and survivors who have come forward to share their experiences with the inquiry and without whom the inquiry’s work would not be possible.

A copy of the Government’s response will be available on gov.uk and copies will also be available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS1213]

JUSTICE

EU Documents and Evidence Regulations

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Government have decided to opt into the amendment to the EU service regulation but not at this stage to the amendment to the EU taking of evidence regulation.

The Government recognise that both regulations underpin the effective operation of the EU civil judicial co-operation framework by providing rules that enable documents to be transmitted between and served in other member states and that enable evidence to be obtained from witnesses in one member state for use in proceedings in another member state.

The decision on whether to opt into these proposals was made in the context of the UK’s objective to seek a mutually beneficial arrangement for the continuation of an effective civil judicial co-operation framework as the UK leaves the EU.

The Government are conscious also that there are a number of issues in both proposals that will need to be resolved during the negotiations, not least the question of the expense of the proposed system to digitise the means of transmission and communication under both regulations. It recognises that the time is right to consider updating both regulations to facilitate the greater use of IT but the exact way of doing that needs to be examined further.

While the Government are content to opt into the proposal regarding the service regulation, they decided that their concerns with the revised taking of evidence regulation proposal need to be resolved before the UK can consider participating in that proposal. In particular, the Government are concerned about the proposal's removal of the requirement of voluntary participation of witnesses giving direct evidence to a court of a different member state, and the resulting implication that coercive measures could be used in such circumstances.

Notwithstanding the opt-in decision relating to taking of evidence, the UK Government consider it is in the interests of the UK to participate in negotiations on the amendment of both regulations.

In the event of the negotiations leading to a successful resolution of the Government’s concerns, and should the taking of evidence proposal be adopted during the proposed implementation period, the UK may decide to seek a post-adoption opt-in at that point.

[HCWS1218]

Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Gauke): The Ministry of Justice is today publishing a consultation paper: Guardianship (Missing Persons) Act 2017 Implementing the Act. The paper seeks views on the Department’s proposals for bringing the Act into force with the object of implementing the Act as smoothly and successfully as practicable. The consultation period will be eight weeks. The consultation paper is available free of charge on gov.uk.

[HCWS1214]
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

UNFCCC Conference of Parties

The Minister for Energy and Clean Growth (Claire Perry): The 24th conference of the parties (COP24) to the United Nations framework convention on climate change (UNFCCC) took place in Katowice, Poland, from 2 to 15 December. I led the United Kingdom delegation, accompanied by the Minister for Asia and the Pacific, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey). As a demonstration of the UK’s action at all levels, the First Minister of Scotland and the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for the Environment also attended, as well as the Deputy Premier of the Government of the British Virgin Islands, representing the UK overseas territories.

The UK’s priorities for COP24 were to accelerate the global political momentum to combat climate change by i) securing a rulebook that would enable the historic Paris agreement to be effectively implemented; and ii) engaging in a constructive dialogue on ambition (the “Talanoa dialogue”) that would generate confidence and enhance action. In doing so, we were also determined to promote the UK’s global climate leadership.

COP24 was an important moment, representing the culmination of three years of negotiations and following shortly after the publication of a landmark scientific report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that highlighted the severe consequences of failing to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

In the negotiations we succeeded in securing our main objectives by delivering an operational rulebook to drive genuine climate action, creating a level playing field, while allowing for flexibility and support for those countries that need it, in light of capacity. Inevitably there is still work to be done, particularly on carbon markets, but the overall picture is of a rulebook that enables the Paris agreement to be taken forward in practice, marking a move from negotiation to implementation.

The UK championed the latest climate science during COP. We played a central role in the progressive alliance of countries striving for a legal outcome that coupled robust rules with a call for more ambitious climate action—both through supporting the High Ambition Coalition’s Stepping Up Climate Ambition statement and through regularly convening the Cartagena dialogue of progressive countries.

Outside the negotiations, the UK had a visible presence at COP. We celebrated one year of the powering past coal alliance (PPCA) that was launched last year. The UK pavilion had over 50 events showcasing UK international support, domestic action, and low carbon expertise. We also made new domestic commitments, including the announcements of a clean growth grand challenge mission to establish one net-zero carbon industrial cluster by 2040 and at least one low carbon cluster by 2030. To kick-start this mission we will invest up to £170 million to develop and deploy low carbon technologies and enable infrastructure in one or more clusters, and we will also provide up to £66 million to develop new technologies and establish innovation centres to support the transformation of our foundation industries.

The UK reaffirmed our commitment to supporting climate action, highlighting recent announcements including an additional £100 million of UK climate finance for the renewable energy performance platform (REPP) to support 40 renewable energy projects in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as £106 million for green construction and £60 million to build capacity to drive clean growth and emissions reductions in key developing countries.

We were also pleased to support Poland as COP presidency in their role, both through constructive engagement on negotiations and also in their three political declarations. The Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), signed the declaration on “just transition”, promoting efforts to ensure no workers or communities are left behind in the transition towards a low carbon future. The UK co-developed Poland’s declaration on e-mobility (building on our successful zero emission vehicle summit in Birmingham in September), and we also supported their declaration on forestry.

We now turn our attention to 2019 and beyond, including the UN Secretary General’s climate summit next September, which will be a vital step as countries look to raise their ambition ahead of 2020. COP26 in 2020 will be a pivotal moment to encourage and take stock of global ambition and prepare the ground for further action. It is for that reason that the UK expressed interest in hosting COP26, continuing to show our global leadership in climate action. However, we note the interest of other countries and will engage with them on this matter. Our priority is to ensure that the conference of the parties is a success.

[HCWS1231]

TREASURY

Finance (No. 3) Bill: EVEL

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Mel Stride): I have today published a written submission outlining the Government’s analysis of how the English laws principle relates to all Government amendments tabled for the Report stage of the Finance (No.3) Bill.

The Department’s assessment is that the amendments do not change the territorial application of the Bill. The analysis holds if all the Government amendments are accepted.

I have deposited a copy of the submission in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1227]
DEFENCE

**Armed Forces Pay Review Body Appointment**

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I am pleased to announce that the Secretary of State for Defence, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson), has appointed Vice-Admiral (Ret’d) Sir David Steel as the next ex-military member of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. His appointment will commence on 1 March 2019 and run until 28 February 2022. This appointment has been conducted in accordance with the guidance of the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments.  

[HCWS1230]

**Future Nuclear Deterrent**

The Secretary of State for Defence (Gavin Williamson): On 18 November 2019—a requirement to cut the wasteful discarding of fish.

The agreed deal ensures that there are now workable solutions to alleviate the risk of choke closing economically important mixed fisheries while also preventing fish from being wastefully discarded unnecessarily. The agreement also includes a commitment to review scientific data as the new regulation comes into effect.

Total fishing opportunities agreed for 2019 included increased quotas for:

- **West of Scotland monkfish (+25%)**
- **Western hake (+28%)**
- **Skates and rays in the English Channel (+10%)**

Limits remained the same for other stocks including Celtic sea sole and pollack—and where the science showed it was necessary, quotas were reduced for certain stocks, including herring in the Celtic sea.

Increases in quota for hake, haddock and megrim will benefit the whole of the UK. Increased quota for monkfish will provide a boost for the Scottish fleet, while Northern Ireland has benefited from an increase in Irish sea cod. Agreements on sea bass will offer welcome support to the inshore fleet in Wales.

The primary focus for agriculture was a debate on the post-2020 CAP reform package, including three legislative proposals: the first on CAP strategic plans; the second on financing, management and monitoring of the CAP; and the third on common market organisation (CMO) of agricultural products. The Commission welcomed engagement from member states and outlined some of the areas to be considered, including the budget and the performance monitoring system. In the discussion that followed, member states stressed the importance of simplification and shared their views on convergence and the need for a transition period. Under the same item, Croatia also gave an update on its inter-parliamentary conference on the future of food and farming.

The Commission also informed Council about the new bio-economy strategy and mentioned initiatives by member states, such as the BIOEAST conference, which Hungary gave an update on under the same item. The UK intervened to welcome the aims of the new strategy. The presidency and Commission updated Council on the future of food and farming.

Six other items were discussed separately under “any other business”:

- **Environment, Food and Rural Affairs**
  - The Commission set out its proposal to amend the present CAP legislation for payments in 2019-20, with the UK intervening in support and to call for additional flexibility.
  - Italy gave an update on forest damage.
  - The Commission informed Council about actions taken following the 2017 Fipronil eggs contamination incident.
  - The presidency discussed the progress of legislative files, namely unfair trading practices, spirit drinks, and fertilisers.
  - Poland gave a presentation on the situation in the pigmeat market situation.
  - The presidency and Commission updated Council on the plant proteins conference held in Vienna in November.
EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

Agreements with Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Stephen Barclay): The UK has reached agreement with Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway (the “EEA EFTA states”), and separately with Switzerland, to resolve the issues arising with those states from the UK’s exit from the European Union. The Government have been clear that their first priority as part of securing a smooth and orderly exit from the EU was to provide certainty for citizens. As such, we announced in February that we were seeking agreements with these countries, similar to the UK’s withdrawal agreement with the EU.

The EEA EFTA states participate in the single market and other EU-led initiatives. As a result, the agreement with them also addresses a small number of the other separation issues that we have agreed with the EU in the withdrawal agreement.

The EEA EFTA agreement will cover:

Citizens’ rights. As with part two of the withdrawal agreement, the agreement ensures that citizens falling within scope will have broadly the same entitlements to work, study and access public services and benefits as now.

Goods on the market, public procurement, intellectual property, and data protection. Provisions in this agreement broadly mirror the arrangements set out in the withdrawal agreement. Where necessary, small technical adaptations have been made, in line with existing technical differences between EU law and the EEA agreement.

Ongoing judicial proceedings. This will allow UK lawyers to continue to appear before the EFTA court in cases which are ongoing at the point of exit.

Police and criminal justice. These provisions broadly mirror the arrangements set out in the withdrawal agreement, but for the smaller subset of police and criminal justice matters in which Norway and Iceland participate.

Governance arrangements. As for EU citizens under the withdrawal agreement, EEA EFTA citizens will be covered by the Independent Monitoring Authority for the Citizens’ Rights Agreement. A joint committee consisting of the UK and the EEA EFTA states will be established to oversee this agreement.

The agreement reached with the Swiss Confederation will lay out the arrangements for citizens when the current EU-Swiss free movement of persons agreement ceases to apply between the UK and Switzerland. This supports the ending of free movement after we leave the EU. The terms of this agreement protect the rights of Swiss citizens in the UK and UK nationals in Switzerland, ensuring that they can continue to contribute to their communities and live their lives broadly as they do now.

Together, these agreements will protect over 50,000 UK citizens living in these countries and nearly 30,000 citizens from these countries in the UK.

It is also the Government’s intention that the rights of these citizens would be protected in the event of a no-deal outcome with the EU. The citizens’ rights agreement with Switzerland already addresses this. We are discussing a separate citizens’ rights agreement with the EEA EFTA states for a no-deal scenario.

I will be depositing these agreements and explainers today in the Libraries of both Houses. The Government intend to sign both agreements before exit day and legislate for them through the EU (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill. Both agreements are subject to ratification processes in each of the relevant states, including the provisions of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act (CRaG) 2010 in the UK.

[HCWS1220]

General Affairs Council 11 December

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Lord Callanan, Minister of State for Exiting the European Union, has made the following statement:

I represented the UK at the General Affairs Council (GAC) meeting on 11 December in Brussels. A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found on the Council of the European Union’s website at: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/gac/2018/12/11/

Multianual financial framework 2021-27

The Council held a policy debate on the multianual financial framework (MFF) for 2021-27. Ministers had a constructive exchange of views on the main political priorities, setting out the implications of the current proposals for their citizens and on their national budgets, ahead of the first substantial debate on the MFF at the December European Council.

Eighteen-month programme of the Council

Ministers endorsed the 18-month work programme of the Council of the European Union. The programme was prepared by the incoming trio of the presidencies of Romania, Finland and Croatia and the High Representative, Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council. The future Romanian presidency presented the trio’s programme of activities from 1 January 2019 to 30 June 2020. The three main areas of focus for the trio are: unity, delivery and building a reinforced narrative on the future of the EU.

Preparation of the European Council on 13 and 14 December 2018 and European Council follow-up

The Council discussed preparations and draft conclusions for the December European Council. These included the next MFF, the single market, migration and external relations. As part of the discussions on external relations, Ministers considered the Commission’s disinformation action plan, which seeks to protect the European elections in May and other national elections. I intervened to welcome in broad terms the joint report on disinformation, and to call for follow-up actions to evaluate the EU’s response.

On migration, I underlined the importance of the conclusions in recognising continued efforts to tackle people smugglers and to intensify third country co-operation. I highlighted the future EU/League of Arab States summit as an excellent opportunity to improve co-operation with a strategic partner.

Rule of law in Poland—article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

The Council held a hearing under article 7(1) treaty on European Union (TEU) on the rule of law in Poland. The Commission updated Ministers on the situation regarding the rule of law in Poland. In response, Poland provided Ministers with a presentation on the evolution of its judicial reforms. The Council is expected to return to this matter at a future meeting.

Values of the Union—Hungary / article 7(1) TEU reasoned proposal

Ministers exchanged views on the procedure following the European Parliament’s triggering of the article 7(1) TEU procedure for Hungary. As part of this procedure, Hungary provided the Council with its written contribution on the issues raised by the Parliament. The Commission has provided a factual contribution on pending infringement procedures against Hungary.
European semester 2019—annual growth survey

The Commission presented the results from the annual growth survey and noted that the EU economy was entering its sixth year of uninterrupted growth. This prosperity was attributed to individual member state and EU actions, with the desire to see greater cohesion between funding and EU economic policy aims in the future.

EU budget for 2019

The Council endorsed the agreement reached with the European Parliament on the EU budget for 2019. The total commitments are set at €165.8 billion, which is an increase of 3.2% compared with 2018. Payments amount to €148.2 billion, 2.4% more than in 2018.

[HCWS1228]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Public Health Grant

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Steve Brine): Today I am publishing the public health allocations to local authorities in England for 2019-20, based on the 2015 spending review profile.

Through the public health grant and the pilot of 100% retained business rate funding for local authorities in Greater Manchester, we are spending £3.134 billion on public health in 2019-20. We will be spending in excess of £16 billion on public health over the five years of the 2015 spending review until 2020, in addition to what the NHS spends on preventative interventions such as immunisation and screening.

The 2019-20 grant will continue to be subject to conditions, including a ring-fence requiring local authorities to use the grant exclusively for public health activity.

Full details of the public health grants to local authorities can be found on gov.uk and have been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses. This information will be communicated to local authorities in a local authority circular.

[HCWS1221]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration: Children

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Government remain committed to relocating the specified number of 480 unaccompanied children to the United Kingdom under section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016, commonly known as the “Dubs amendment”. The first 220 of those children arrived under exceptional circumstances as part of the UK’s comprehensive support to the clearance of the Calais camp from October 2016. During this time, this Government took unprecedented action to remove vulnerable children from a dangerous situation where they were at risk of violence and abuse.

Following discussion with delivery partners, we have decided to remove the date criterion for when children had to have arrived in Europe to qualify for transfer to the UK. Delivering section 67 in a safe way, which respects individual states’ national laws and the best interests of children, remains a priority for the Government.

This decision means that participating states—France, Greece and Italy—will now be able to refer the most vulnerable children, regardless of when they arrived into Europe. To be eligible for the scheme, it must be in the child’s best interests to come to the UK, rather than to remain in their current host country, be transferred to another EU member state or to be reunited with family outside of Europe. We continue to ask participating states to prioritise unaccompanied children who are most likely to be granted refugee status and/or are the most vulnerable.

It is this Government’s hope that removing the date criterion will speed up transfers and will enable participating states to more easily identify children for transfer as soon as possible. We are grateful for the ongoing support to meet this commitment from the Governments of participating states, delivery partners and UK local authorities. Ensuring the safe relocation of children under the scheme as soon as possible is dependent on appropriate care placements being available for children once they arrive in the UK. The Home Office continues to work closely with local authorities across the UK to ensure that child’s individual care needs can be met.

[HCWS1255]

EU Settlement Scheme

The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes): The Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) is today laying before Parliament a statement of changes in immigration rules [HC 1849], copies of which are available in the Vote Office. The changes implement the next phase of the roll-out of the EU settlement scheme, for resident EU citizens and their family members to obtain UK immigration status. The immigration rules for the scheme came into force on 28 August 2018, for the purposes of an initial private beta test phase, involving 12 NHS trusts and three universities in north-west England. This successfully proved some key elements of the scheme in a live environment, and we published a report on its findings on 31 October 2018.

A second, expanded private beta phase began from 1 November 2018 and will end on 21 December 2018. This has tested the online application process as an integrated, end-to-end process. It has been available, on a voluntary basis, to staff in the higher education, health and social care sectors across the UK, and to some vulnerable individuals, being supported by a small number of local authorities and community groups, in order to test the operation of the scheme for those with support needs.

We will publish a full report on the second private beta phase in January 2019. However, the initial findings from this phase have been positive. By 13 December 2018, more than 15,500 applications had been made and more than 12,400 of these had been concluded, enabling the new system and applicant interaction with it to be tested at scale: 71% of the concluded applications were granted settled status, with the rest granted pre-settled status, and many received their decision within 24 hours; 77% of applicants who provided feedback said that they found the online application process easy, or fairly easy, to complete. More than 90% of applicants successfully used the identity verification app to prove their identity remotely, with the rest required to submit their identity document by post.
We have also learned lessons from this second private beta phase which have enabled further improvements to be made. These include improved functionality in respect of how an applicant verifies their email address; an increase in the size of files an applicant can upload; should they need to provide supporting evidence; and updates to the caseworking system.

In light of the successful testing of the online application process during the private beta phases, we have decided to proceed, as planned, with the start of the wider public implementation of the EU settlement scheme from 21 January 2019. From that date, the scheme will be available to resident EU citizens (and their EU citizen family members) with a valid passport, and to their non-EU citizen family members holding a valid biometric residence card, so that they can prove their identity remotely using the identity verification app, which is an integrated part of the online application process.

We currently anticipate that the further implementation of the EU settlement scheme will be secured through further immigration rules changes to be laid before Parliament in early March 2019, so that the scheme will be fully open by 30 March 2019. [HCWS1226]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Future Leadership of UNAIDS

The Secretary of State for International Development (Penny Mordaunt): Since the beginning of 2018, the UNAIDS Secretariat has been in the spotlight due to allegations of harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and abuse of power within the organisation. As Chair of the UNAIDS programme co-ordinating board (PCB), the UK played a key role in establishing an independent expert panel (IEP) on prevention and response to harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and abuse of power. The resulting report published on 7 December, provides important recommendations to enable the UNAIDS Secretariat, and its leadership, to take action to tackle these issues, ensuring zero tolerance within the organisation.

The IEP report is highly critical of the UNAIDS Secretariat and its senior leadership. Like others, the UK is very concerned about these findings. As Chair we have worked with the board to ensure a robust response to the IEP report’s findings, to allow these critical issues to be addressed swiftly and comprehensively.

The UK recognises the critical role that UNAIDS plays in the global AIDS response. However, the UK Government have been very clear that we expect all the organisations we work with to operate to the highest standards on the issue of harassment, including sexual harassment, bullying and abuse of power.

The IEP made it clear in their report that addressing these issues within the UNAIDS Secretariat requires new leadership. While the UK welcomes the decision by the PCB to initiate the process for the recruitment of a new executive director immediately, it is also vital to signal a strong response on these critical issues within and beyond the organisation. For this reason, the UK expects the current executive director to step down.

[HCWS1223]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Personal Independence Payment

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Sarah Newton): I would like to update the House on the improvements my Department is making in personal independence payment (PIP). The guidance available to PIP case managers was updated in August 2018 to ensure those who are awarded the highest level of support whose needs are unlikely to improve or will deteriorate receive an ongoing award with a light-touch review at the 10-year point. Following on from the introduction of that guidance in August, we have now commenced activity to review the claims of existing claimants on the top level of support to identify those individuals who, in light of the new guidance, should be receiving an ongoing award. This is still in the early stages and being dealt with in date order, prioritising claimants whose awards are coming up for an award review, but commencing this activity is a really important step to reducing the number of individuals having to undergo an unnecessary award review where their needs are only likely to deteriorate.

A copy of the guidance for case managers has been placed in the House of Commons Library and is available at: http://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2018-1113/UN174062__Award_period_guidance_10.10.18.pdf

The light-touch review process and guidance itself has not yet been developed, but we aim to do so well in advance of the first such reviews taking place. We intend to consult with stakeholders as part of that process.

My written statement of 25 June 2018 (HCWS793) informed the House that my Department had begun an exercise to identify anyone who may be entitled to more support under PIP as a result of the MH and RJ decisions of the upper tribunal. The MH decision broadened the interpretation about how symptoms of overwhelming psychological distress should be assessed for the purpose of mobility activity 1 in PIP. The RJ decision concerned how the Department considers a claimant to be carrying out an activity safely and whether they need supervision to do so. I committed to regularly updating the House of developments regarding this administrative exercise.

The Department has today published an ad hoc release of management information on the administrative exercise: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/dwp-ad-hoc-analyses#2018.

As at 23 November 2018, 140,000 cases had been cleared, of which 1,000 had been paid arrears. The average payment made is approximately £4,500. We are monitoring the numbers of, and reasons for, revised awards closely and making regular quality checks in order to ensure that our decision making is accurate and fair.

Given the complexity of the exercise we have started at a relatively small scale to test our processes and ensure they are effective before ramping up. At the same time we have recruited over 250 additional staff to increase resources available for this exercise, with more to follow over the coming months.

[HCWS1223]
In addition, we are redirecting resource from other areas of PIP. This means the administrative exercise will conclude in 2020. Some DLA to PIP reassessments that would have taken place in 2019-20 will move to the following year. I believe that prioritising cases where claimants are entitled to arrears is the correct approach.

Further information on how the administrative exercise is being undertaken is set out in an updated frequently asked questions. I will deposit a copy of this document in the Library of the House.

Furthermore, I would like to inform the House that the Department implemented another upper tribunal decision on 17 December and will commence a review exercise in the new year.

This exercise regards the decision in OM which was handed down on November 2017. This decision refers to DLA claimants transferring to PIP, who failed to attend or participate in their PIP consultations, and who had their DLA terminated as a result, but where, subsequently, DWP decision makers or tribunals have decided the claimant had a “good reason” for not attending or participating. The decision states that in these instances claimants’ DLA awards should be reinstated, until a final decision on their PIP claim, and back paid, as necessary. We accept that the same approach applies where claimants who failed to provide information or evidence were later found to have “good reason” for the failure to comply.

The Department has been working at pace and taking the necessary steps required to implement the ruling. We expect around 4,600 people to gain as a result of this review exercise, all claimants who benefit from the upper tribunal decision will be notified by the Department.

[HCWS1224]
Petitions
Thursday 13 December 2018

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

Home Education: draft guidance and the consultation

The petition of residents of South Walsall.

Declare that the “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” has been written following significant consultation with local authorities and no consultation whatsoever with the home education community; further that the consultation is consequently for little more than show as an intention to implement the content has already been stated; further that it seeks to encourage local authorities to breach the ECHR Article 8 and the GDPR; and further that the report provides no accessible means for a parent to address ultra vires behaviour by their local authority, where many of those authorities already act routinely in an ultra vires manner.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to withdraw the draft guidance and the consultation, until it has put in place an accessible and workable complaints procedure and further has consulted with home educating parents, as it has with Local Authorities, what the contents should include.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Valerie Vaz, Official Report, 14 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 540.]

[Pet002289]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

The consultation “Home Education—Call for Evidence and revised DfE guidance” closed on 2 July 2018. The relevant documents can be found at:

As well as the call for evidence, the consultation includes draft versions of two guidance documents on the current arrangements for home education. These are intended to replace the Department for Education’s current non-statutory guidance for local authorities, which is to be found at:

The Department discussed home education with stakeholders in the normal course of business up to the launch of the consultation on 10 April.

All responses to the consultation will be considered before publishing the finalised guidance documents. At no point has the Department stated an intention to publish them as final versions without revision in the light of responses received to the consultation.

Representations on whether the contents of the two draft guidance documents breach Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights (right to private and family life) or the provisions of the General Data Protection Regulation (as embodied into UK law in the Data Protection Act 2018), will be taken into account as we consider responses to the consultation.

The documents in their draft form contain no reference to remedies for behaviour by local authorities. This is because no special provision for this is necessary in respect of home education. The Education Act 1996 already contains general provisions for this purpose relating to local authorities. However, the Department will consider whether the finalised versions of the guidance documents should contain specific information on this.

This Department does not recognise the suggestion that consultation has been flawed or inadequate. Several thousand responses, the majority of which have come from home educating families, have been received, as well as a substantial petition, and there has been considerable opportunity for detailed comment and input from such families. Following the consultation and consideration of the responses, the two guidance documents will be published in the autumn of 2018 in their revised and finalised form. In addition, a formal Government response document analysing responses to the call for evidence, and setting out next steps, will also be published in the autumn of 2018.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum of Nelly Gelves

The petition of residents of North East Lincolnshire.

Declares that the situation in Venezuela is desperate and inhumane; further that it would be wrong for an asylum seeker of 73 years old to be returned to political and religious repression in a country where she has practically no access to money, food and basic medicines.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the Asylum and Humanitarian Protection of Nelly Gelves in the UK to allow her to continue to live with her family.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Melanie Onn, Official Report, 21 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 976.]

[Pet002295]

Observations from the Minister of State for Immigration (Caroline Nokes):

The Government cannot comment on individual cases, because doing so would breach their obligations to treat such personal matters in confidence.

The Government have a proud record of providing protection for those who genuinely need it, in accordance with our international obligations under the Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights. Every asylum claim is carefully considered on its individual merits, by assessing all the evidence provided by the claimant against policy, relevant caselaw and available country information from a wide range of recognised and publicly disclosable sources. These include the UN and its agencies, Governments, the media and human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The Government will grant protection where someone demonstrates they face persecution or serious harm in their country and they are unable to seek protection from the national authorities or move to another part
of their country to live safely. The Government are very clear that we do not return anyone who faces persecution or serious harm to their country.

There may be exceptional situations where conditions in a particular country, for example, absence of water, food or basic shelter, are unacceptable to the point that return in itself would constitute inhuman and degrading treatment for the individual concerned. Some of the factors which will be taken into account by asylum decision makers when considering the asylum claim include age, gender, ill-health, the effect on children, other family circumstances, and available support structures.

There is also provision in the Home Office policy on Discretionary Leave to allow people to stay in the UK on a discretionary basis, where they do not qualify for protection, but where there are other exceptional circumstances such that expecting them to return to their country would not be appropriate.

Those who are found not to need protection are refused and have a right of appeal to the courts. Once their appeals rights are exhausted they are required to leave the UK. If they do not leave voluntarily, the Government will seek to enforce their removal.
Petition

Monday 17 December 2018

OBSERVATIONS

WORK AND PENSIONS

Women affected by changes to the state pension age

The petition of residents of Newport East,

Declares that the 1995 Pensions Act has been implemented unfairly, with little/no personal notice (1995/2011 Pension Acts), faster than promised (2011 Pension Act), and no time to alternative plans; further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences; and further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with a lack of appropriate notification.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the All Party Parliamentary Group on State Pension Inequality for Women to make fair transitional arrangements for all women affected who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age (SPA).

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jessica Morden, Official Report, 1 November 2018; Vol. 648, c. 1202.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd):

Declares that the 1995 Pensions Act has been implemented unfairly, with little/no personal notice (1995/2011 Pension Acts), faster than promised (2011 Pension Act), and no time to (make) alternative plans; further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences; and further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with a lack of appropriate notification.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the All Party Parliamentary Group on State Pension Inequality for Women to make fair transitional arrangements for all women affected who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age (SPA).

In 1995, after two years of debate in Parliament and following public consultation, the Government brought in a law to equalise men and women's State Pension age (SPAs). This increased the earliest age when a woman could claim State Pension (SP) from 60 to 65. The Government planned for the original change to take place over 10 years between 2010 and 2020.

However, life expectancy continued to rise. The Government recognised they needed to make further changes to keep the SP affordable. In 2007 they introduced a law to increase SPAs for everyone to 66 by 2026, to 67 by 2036 and to 68 by 2046. In 2011 they introduced another law to equalise men and women's SPAs more quickly. The 2011 law also brought forward the increase in everyone's SPAs from 65 to 66 by five and a half years.

The 2011 Government's original plan was to bring forward the increase in men and women's SPAs from 65 to 66 by six years, so that SPAs would reach 66 in April 2020 rather than April 2026. This meant that some women affected would experience a delay in receiving their State Pension of up to two years, compared to the original 1995 timetable. The Government listened to concerns, and as a result, introduced transitional arrangements, worth £1.1 billion. The revised timetable phases in the transition from 65 to 66 more slowly, so that SPAs reaches 66 in October 2020, rather than April 2020. This concession reduced the proposed delay experienced in reaching State Pension age for over 450,000 men and women, and means that no woman will see her pension age change by more than 18 months, relative to the original 1995 Act timetable.

We have considered the alternative options and found there are substantial practical, financial and legal problems to all alternative options that have been suggested to mitigate the impact on those affected.

Reversing the 2011 SPAs changes would cost over £3 billion up to the end of 2025/26, whilst returning to a female SPA of 60 would cost over £77 billion by 2020/21. Going back on these changes could also create a new inequality between men and women.

Any amendment to the current legislation which creates a new inequality between men and women would unquestionably be highly dubious as a matter of law.

Further changes to SPAs are not justified, particularly given the need to use public money to help those most in need.

Our 'Fuller Working Lives Strategy: A Partnership Approach', published in February 2017, aims to help older workers remain in or return to employment, and to change employer's attitudes. It also sets out the action Government are taking to support older workers to remain in the labour market. There are more people in employment aged 50 years and over than ever before with 10.3 million workers aged 50+; an increase of 1.4 million over the last five years. There are now 4.3 million women aged 50-64 in employment which is an increase of 700,000 over the last five years.

The Government have changed the law to create the right support for our Fuller Working Lives strategy. For example it is now against the law to dismiss someone from their employment just because they reach the age of 65. Employees also have the right to request flexible working as long as they have worked continuously for the company for six months. This means people can agree a work pattern to suit their circumstances.

The Government also support vulnerable people. They spend around £50 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions, and also provide support to eligible carers through the payment of Carers Allowance.

Since 1995 the Government have gone to significant lengths to communicate SPAs changes. Letters were sent to women born between 6 April 1950 and 5 April 1953 from April 2009 to March 2011 informing them of State Pension changes. Those affected by the 2011 SPAs changes were written to between January 2012 and November 2013.

Over the last 18 years the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has provided over 25 million personalised State Pension estimates. It has encouraged people to request these as part of their long-term financial planning—after all, retirement is a life changing financial decision and people are expected to plan for this.
Following the 1995 SPa changes, the equalisation of men and women’s SPa was often reported in the media and debated at length in Parliament. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) produced communications materials relating to increases in State Pension age (SPa) for both men and women, and carried out a pension’s education campaign between 2001 and 2004. This included information on the future equalisation of SPa. Later DWP sent individual letters to those affected. The Government made further increases to SPa in 2011 after a public consultation exercise and extensive debates in Parliament.

With the Government facing increasing financial pressures, it is simply not justified to reverse these changes, especially when we take into account that women who reached State Pension age in 2016 are estimated to receive more State Pension on average over their lifetime than women ever have before.

We will be making no further changes to the law on this issue. Doing so would mean working-age people, especially younger people, bearing a greater financial burden to support the rising costs of the pensions system.
The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that taxpayers should provide no funding for a private wedding, no matter who is getting married; further that the exact details of royal wedding funding are shrouded in secrecy; further that we do know that expensive road closures and policing will be required and further that we know local councils and the taxpayer ends up footing the bill.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure the highest standards of openness and transparency relating to the funding of Princess Eugenie and Jack Brooksbank wedding; further to tell the Government to commit no public funds to the wedding and to publish a report of all costs to taxpayers.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Emma Dent Coad, Official Report, 31 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 4P.]

Observations from The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service (Mr Nick Hurd):

Police and Crime Commissioners can apply to Ministers to seek Police Special Grant funding for unexpected and exceptional events which have a major financial impact on their force.

The majority of the costs of the wedding of Princess Eugenie and Mr Jack Brooksbank were met privately. Thames Valley Police undertook operations to ensure the safety and security of the public during this event. This was an operational decision for the police force.

Ministers have received a request for additional funding from the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley through the Police Special Grant totalling just over £850,000. This application is being considered in line with standard Special Grant processes.

The Government are committed to openness and transparency. Special Grant claims information is published on an annual basis on www.gov.uk (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/police-funding-special-grant-applications). This includes the amount of funding applied for and granted. It is not common practice to publish a detailed breakdown of the costs as it could potentially harm the integrity of similar future police security operations around major events.

The petition of residents of Glasgow North West,

Declares that Universal Credit has already been introduced, has plunged people into rent arrears, household debt and left families to rely on foodbanks.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to halt the roll-out of Universal Credit until its fundamental flaws have been fixed, particularly the six-week payment delay, and help those who are already suffering in poverty and crisis as a result of this policy.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Carol Monaghan, Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 750.]

Roll-out of Universal Credit in Glasgow

The petition of residents of Glasgow North,

Declares that the proposed roll-out of universal credit in the city of Glasgow will have a devastating impact on communities across the city and will lead to increased foodbank usage and financial misery for some of the most vulnerable people in Glasgow.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Work and Pensions to halt the roll-out of Universal Credit in Glasgow and fix it without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jack Grady, Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 750.]

The petition of residents of Glasgow East constituency,

Declares that the proposed roll-out of universal credit in the city of Glasgow will have a devastating impact on communities across the city and will lead to increased foodbank usage and financial misery for some of the most vulnerable people in Glasgow.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department for Work and Pensions to halt the roll-out of Universal Credit in Glasgow and fix it without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patrick Grady, Official Report, 29 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 750.]

Universal Credit Roll out

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that the roll out of Universal Credit in the local area will have a devastating impact on communities across the district and will lead to increased foodbank usage and financial misery for some of the most vulnerable people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Work and Pensions to halt the roll out of Universal Credit in the Grangemouth, Bathgate and Falkirk Jobcentre areas and fix it without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, Official Report, 13 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 287.]}
The petition of residents of Glasgow South West,

Declares that the proposed roll out of Universal Credit in the city of Glasgow will have a devastating impact on communities across the city and will lead to increased foodbank usage and financial misery for some of the most vulnerable people in Glasgow.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Department of Work and Pensions to halt the roll out of Universal Credit in Glasgow and fix it without delay.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Chris Stephens, Official Report, 20 November 2018; Vol. 649, c. 834.]

Observations from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Amber Rudd):

Universal Credit was introduced with cross-party support to replace the old benefits system, which is complicated, inflexible and involves different agencies and Government Departments. The cliff edges and complicated hours rules would often mean that people were put off from taking up work or trapped into being unable to take on more hours, due to the prohibitive tax rates they would face on earnings. We believe we should have a welfare system that supports people when they need help, assists people into work, and is fair to those who pay for it.

Universal Credit is a force for good. It provides support for those who cannot work and those who need help, including an unprecedented level of personalised support. People required to look and prepare for work receive tailored support managed through personal work coaches, who know each person’s case and have more tools and flexibility than ever before to help people prepare for work and get a job.

This Government continue to spend to more than £95 billion a year on benefits for people of working age. This demonstrates the Government’s commitment to a robust welfare safety net.

The Department continues to rollout Universal Credit in a safe and measured way, there are now more than 1 million people claiming the benefit, so it is now operating at scale across the country. By December 2018 Universal Credit will be available in every jobcentre nationally and the programme remains on track to deliver to this plan. Where issues are raised the Department has listened and made changes to improve the delivery of Universal Credit throughout the rollout.

Following feedback last year, we announced a £1.5 billion package of improvements to Universal Credit for the first assessment period in the Autumn Budget. These include increasing advances to up to 100% of the indicative award available from day one of a claim and increasing the repayment period to 12 months. Further measures included removing the seven waiting days, providing an additional payment of two weeks of Housing Benefit to support claimants when they transition to Universal Credit, and changing how claimants in temporary accommodation receive support for their housing costs.

Another change, following feedback and engagement with landlords is the Landlord Portal, which was introduced in autumn 2017. This provides Social Rented Sector landlords with the ability to submit information directly to the Universal Credit online system, which supports timely and accurate payment of housing costs to claimants. This is rolled out in tandem with Trusted Partner status which helps us to target support for vulnerable people. As a Trusted Partner, a social landlord can decide where a tenant would benefit from having a Managed Payment to Landlord put in place. Our research has shown that whilst many people join Universal Credit with pre-existing rent arrears, the proportion of people with arrears falls by a third after four months on Universal Credit.

This year we have continued to listen to concerns and in the Budget 2018 we announced a £4.5 billion cash boost to Universal Credit to ensure that vulnerable claimants and families are supported in the transition to Universal Credit, and so that millions keep more of what they earn.

This includes an extra £1.7 billion a year into work allowances, increasing them by £1,000 a year, resulting in 2.4 million families keeping substantially more of their earnings before the earning taper applies, strengthening work incentives even more and providing a boost to the incomes of the lowest paid.

We also announced that payment of Income Support and the income related elements of Employment and Support Allowance and Jobseeker’s Allowance will continue for two weeks after a claim for Universal Credit has been made, effective from July 2020, benefiting 1.1 million households. This will apply to all managed migration cases, and to natural migration cases where a claim to Universal Credit ends entitlement to legacy benefits. This extra financial support is intended to help claimants support in the five-week period up to their first monthly payment of Universal Credit, and will not need to be repaid. This builds upon the similar two week run-on of Housing Benefit that was announced at Autumn Budget 2017, and which was introduced in April this year.

To help claimants further, we announced at Autumn Budget 2018 that claimants will also see a reduction in the cap for deductions from 40% to 30% of a claimant’s standard allowance from October 2019, to soften the burden of debt repayments. Additionally, advances can be repaid over 16 months from October 2021.

As well as the policy changes we have made in response to feedback about Universal Credit, the Department has also introduced a number of IT system improvements to improve the operational delivery of Universal Credit. For example we have introduced a feature allowing claimants to upload self-employed earnings online. Furthermore, in February 2018 we introduced a feature enabling claimants to verify their childcare costs online, and in early July 2018 we made it possible for claimants to apply for advances online.

Currently claimants who are need of digital support or personal budgeting support can access this through Universal Support which is currently delivered by local authorities and local partners. From 1 April 2019, Citizens Advice and Citizens Advice Scotland will be leading on the delivery of Universal Support. This brand new partnership will deliver a more consistent and more effective service to support all claimants as they make their Universal Credit claims, in particular those who are most vulnerable. Citizens Advice have a nationwide, trusted brand with a history of delivering advice and guidance which makes them uniquely positioned to deliver effective support to those who need it.
Managed Migration

Universal Credit will be fully available nationwide in December 2018. After this, Universal Credit will enter the next phase of rollout, in which the DWP will begin to move people from existing benefits to Universal Credit. This process is known as managed migration. The draft Universal Credit (Transitional Provisions) (Managed Migration) Amendment Regulations 2018 were laid in Parliament on 5 November 2018.

We are committed to delivering managed migration in a way which supports claimants. In 2019, and in line with our approach of listening and adapting, we will test and refine our approach with a very small number of claimants from July 2019 to check that it is working well, before we take on larger volumes in 2020. We will complete the managed migration process by the end of 2023.

As part of that, we are co-designing the process with claimants, charities, experts and other stakeholders, making sure that it works for everyone and building in safeguards to ensure that vulnerable claimants are fully supported. To complete managed migration successfully, we will work closely with key stakeholders, experts and claimants throughout the process.

We will be testing a number of approaches to move claimants safely to Universal Credit in the most effective way during our test period. This will include testing a non-mandatory approach where claimants will be invited to go through the process. We will use the results of this to adapt the managed migration process as appropriate.

There are £2.4 billion of unclaimed benefits not going to the people who need them, because they do not know about them. The Managed Migration regulations are vital to ensure that people missing out on benefits in the legacy system will receive them. When migration is complete, 700,000 more people will get paid their full entitlement because of Universal Credit, a million disabled people will be better off, and everyone that is managed migrated onto Universal Credit will be eligible for transitional protection. Once Universal Credit is fully rolled out we will be giving claimants an extra £2.1 billion a year than we would on the legacy system it replaces.

In the light of the above, we can see no reason to halt the rollout of Universal Credit and the proven benefits it brings.
Petition

Thursday 20 December 2018

OBSERVATIONS

EDUCATION

European Baccalaureate Qualification

The petition of teachers at, parents of pupils at, or friends of the Europa School Culham, Oxfordshire,

Declares that in relation to the Europa School, the school currently offers children who attend the school a final qualification of the European Baccalaureate (EB). The ability of the school to offer this qualification has been extended by the Department of Education to 2021. However, uncertainty over the school’s ability to offer the qualification after 2021 is causing difficulties for students and much uncertainty.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons to ask the Department of Education to allow the Europa School in Culham, Oxfordshire, to offer to its students from 2021 the European Baccalaureate as an equivalent to A levels regardless of the status of the UK in respect of its membership of the European Union.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Howell, Official Report, 24 October 2018; Vol. 648, c. 400.]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb):

We recognise that Europa School UK is currently facing a period of uncertainty in light of ongoing discussions with the European Schools Board of Governors about the ability of the school to offer the European Baccalaureate once the UK leaves the EU in March 2019. We thank Europa School for continuing to support its students through this time and were very pleased to hear of the 100% pass rate for students who completed the European Baccalaureate in 2018.

Officials from the Regional Schools Commissioner’s Office, International Education Division and Education and Skills Funding Agency are working with the school to support their future planning.

The Government were successful in securing a provision in the Withdrawal Agreement, as agreed by the EU Member States on 25 November, that allows for Europa School’s continued accreditation as a European School until the end of August 2021. This is subject to renewal of accreditation by the European Schools Board of Governors. We recognise that Europa’s preference would be to continue to deliver the European Baccalaureate post 2021.

Beyond the terms set out in the Withdrawal Agreement, accreditation to deliver the European Baccalaureate is only available to schools located in an EU Member State. The Government are, therefore, not in a position to allow Europa School to offer to its students, from 2021, the European Baccalaureate as an equivalent to A levels, regardless of the status of the UK in respect of its membership of the EU. This would be dependent on a decision by the European Union Member States and Commission, through the European Schools Board of Governors, to change their rules on accredited schools. At present that seems highly unlikely.

As a responsible Government, we urge the school to put in place plans to implement an alternative curriculum. We welcome the fact that the school has put in an application be able to deliver the International Baccalaureate qualification from September 2020. This qualification would allow the school to retain its advanced language teaching and a unique offer of education to pupils.

We appreciate the difficult position the school finds itself in and the Department is committed to ensuring it will support the school with their plans by maintaining regular contact and by continuing to work with the school.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 12 December 2018

EDUCATION
Improving Education Standards

The following is an extract from a speech on Improving Education Standards on 29 November 2018.

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): At Downhills Primary School in Haringey in 2011, just 63% of pupils were achieving the expected standard in the old SATs in reading, writing and maths combined, compared with the national average at the time of 79%.

Letter of correction from Nick Gibb.
An error has been identified in my opening speech. The correct wording should have been:

Nick Gibb: At Downhills Primary School in Haringey in 2011, just 63% of pupils were achieving the expected standard in the old SATs in reading, writing and maths combined, compared with the national average at the time of 67%.
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 17 December 2018

WORK AND PENSIONS

State Pension Age

The following is an extract from the statement on the State Pension Age on 8 February 2018.

Guy Opperman: Those affected by the 1995 Act changes were sent letters informing them of the change to their state pension age between 2009 and 2011, with letters sent to 1.2 million women. Those affected by the Pensions Act 2011 changes were sent letters between January 2012 and November 2013, which involved sending over 5 million letters with an accompanying leaflet. [Official Report, 8 February 2018, Vol. 635, c. 1693.]

Letter of correction from Guy Opperman:
An error has been identified in my closing speech.
The correct information should have been:

Guy Opperman: Those affected by the 1995 Act changes were sent letters informing them of the change to their state pension age between 2009 and 2011, with letters sent to 1.2 million women. Those affected by the Pensions Act 2011 changes were sent letters between January 2012 and November 2013, which involved sending over 5 million letters. Both lots of letters had appropriate supporting information.

State Pension: Women born in the 1950s

The following is an extract from the Westminster Hall debate on State Pension: Women born in the 1950s, on 22 November 2018.

Guy Opperman: Cohort life expectancy at birth in Scotland is currently 87 for men and 90 for women, and cohort life expectancy at age 65 in Scotland is currently 19 years for men and 21 years for women. [Official Report, 22 November 2018, Vol. 649, c. 425WH.]

Letter of correction from Guy Opperman:
An error has been identified in my closing speech.
The correct information should have been:

Guy Opperman: Cohort life expectancy at birth in Scotland is currently 88 for men and 90 for women, and cohort life expectancy at age 65 in Scotland is currently 19 years for men and 21 years for women.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Draft Competition (Amendments etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019

The following is an extract from the Third Delegated Legislation Committee on 5 December 2018.

Kelly Tolhurst: We have also assessed—working with the CMA, obviously—that the CMA might have to deal with between 15 and 30 extra merger cases over a year. [Official Report, Third Delegated Legislation Committee, 5 December 2018; c. 9.]

Letter of correction from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):
An error has been identified in the response I gave to the Committee:
The correct response should have been:

Kelly Tolhurst: We have also assessed—working with the CMA, obviously—that the CMA might have to deal with between 30 and 50 extra merger cases over a year.
Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 20 December 2018

EDUCATION

STEM Subjects

The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 17 December 2018.

Anne Milton: The Government’s industrial strategy specifically targets STEM shortage skills. Between 2012 and 2018, entries to A-level maths rose by 25%. It is now the most popular A-level. Exam entries for GCSE computer science have increased from 2013, when it was first examined, from just over 4,000 to more than 70,000 in 2018. That is in part down to the £7.2 million funding that is going into maths hubs. A number of programmes have given STEM a real drive in schools and further education.

Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills:

Errors have been identified in my response. The correction information should have been:

Anne Milton: The Government’s industrial strategy specifically targets STEM shortage skills. Between 2010 and 2018, entries to A-level maths rose by 25%. It is now the most popular A-level. Exam entries for GCSE computer science have increased from 2013, when it was first examined, from just over 4,000 to more than 70,000 in 2018. £7.2 million of funding annually is going into maths hubs. A number of programmes have given STEM a real drive in schools and further education.

The following is a second extract from questions to the Secretary of State for Education on 17 December 2018.

Anne Milton: For instance, since 2010 we have seen 26% more women entering STEM A-levels. However, we recognise that the take-up for physics is notably low and we have put money into the Stimulating Physics Network. I praise hon. Members who have taken part in the Year of Engineering. We know that at primary school girls and boys have similar levels of interest in STEM subjects, but that that tails off quite substantially at secondary school. We are doing research to understand that better.

Letter of correction from the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills:

Errors have been identified in my response. The correction information should have been:

Anne Milton: For instance, since 2010 we have seen 26% more women entering STEM A-levels in England. However, we recognise that the take-up for physics is notably low and we have put money into the Stimulating Physics Network. I praise hon. Members who have taken part in the Year of Engineering. We know that girls’ interest in STEM subjects tails off quite substantially at secondary school. We are doing research to understand that better.